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**REFLECTION AND THE DISTANCE
LANGUAGE LEARNER**

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REFLECTION AND THE DISTANCE LANGUAGE LEARNER

ABSTRACT

This research examines the role of critical reflection in learning theories and the relationship between Kolb's learning cycle and notions of the 'good' language learner, the deep approach to learning and autonomous learning in the context of adult, part-time, distance language learning. This group of learners is under-represented in the research literature.

The research takes an exploratory-interpretative approach. Open University Language students had been invited by their tutors to use materials based on Kolb's learning cycle, designed to encourage critical reflection in order to enhance learning. In-depth interviews explored the experience of users and non-users. Course materials were examined for evidence of encouragement and support for critical reflection and autonomy. The research aimed to establish what OU language learners do to develop productive and receptive language skills and the extent to which they demonstrate capacities of critical reflection and autonomy. It examined the extent to which these capacities were developed via course materials and assignments and the impact of the style and pace of study. It considered whether these capacities could be enhanced by the project materials, as well as the influence of tutors' expectations and approaches.

The majority of interviewees exhibited considerable functional activity except in writing skills. They demonstrated characteristics of the 'good' language learner, elements of a deep approach and features of autonomous learning. This contrasted with a surface approach to coursework and assignments, brought about by excessive workload and the controlled, anxiety-provoking nature of assessment. Analysis of assignments also suggested they were likely to evoke a surface approach. Course materials advocated reflection, self-assessment and self-evaluation, but did not support this via teaching or practice and offered few decision-making opportunities.

Students exercised the capacity for critical reflection and autonomy to varying degrees. Those who had used the project materials appeared more likely to make decisions about their learning, and set specific goals. The project materials were judged a straightforward framework for reflection. Tutors were positive about the materials but appeared to give little attention to critical reflection. Their concerns about time constraints and student workload may have confirmed student perceptions and discouraged use of the project materials.

The research suggests broadening the notion of the 'good' language learner. It proposes more explicit development of learning strategies and the capacity for critical reflection within course materials and tutorials, and giving more attention to the nature and impact of assessment in order to foster 'active', deep, autonomous learning.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Background to the research

A series of developments focusing on the issue of effective student learning have provided the impetus for this research. 'Learning to Learn' was one of the Key Skills which the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (NCIHE, Dearing, 1997) recommended should be fostered within the HE curriculum (recommendation 21). In 1997, the Open University (OU) Vocational Qualifications Centre¹ participated in a DfEE² project *Supporting Key Skills Achievement in Higher Education*. This involved piloting materials designed to enhance the key skills development and achievement of students in HE, particularly the skill of 'Learning to Learn'. I took part in this pilot as member of a team that devised and facilitated workshops which introduced these materials to students. The materials were based on Kolb's learning cycle which suggests that effective learning takes place when learners reflect on their experience in order to gain new perspectives and understanding, leading to fresh activity or 'experience' (Kolb, 1984). The materials were to be used in connection with the assignments for an individual student's course of study. They were generic, intended for use across faculties, and were ultimately published as a pack *Key Skills: Making a Difference* (OU/DfEE, 1998). However, it was apparent that the materials did not reflect specific skills needed by language students and required revision before they could be used to encourage language learners to reflect on their experience as intended.

Also in 1997, Schrafnagl and Fage (1998) investigated the use which students of the French course L120 *Ouverture* in the OU London region made of the learning resources provided and the learning strategies which they adopted. The learning resources included course materials, the *Language Learner's Good Study Guide* (LLGSG), tutor, tutorials and tutor

¹ Now the Centre for Outcomes Based Education (COBE).

² Now the Department for Education and Skills (DfES).

feedback on assignments. Findings indicated that many students made little or no active use of the *LLGSG* or the detailed feedback from their tutors, made few demands on their tutors, and relied on a limited range of largely passive strategies. Although tutors frequently refer students to specific points in the course or grammar books, they rarely refer them to advice on learning strategies in the *LLGSG*. Courses encourage students to keep a 'dossier' 'Notizbuch' or 'diario', but this is generally presented as a place to make notes about points of language usage rather than to reflect on learning and progress in order to use materials and time effectively.

Following the NCIHE report, a number of Key Skills development projects were set up under the HE Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning (FDTL) which included 'Learning to Learn' in language learning. For example, *Translang* (Transferable Skills Development for Non-specialist Learners of Modern Languages) and CIEL (Curriculum and Independence for the Learner). These projects focused on classroom or self-access centre based language learning and identification of transferable language skills for employability rather than on distance language learning or enhancement of language learning strategies.

The OU had already produced generic material for tutors seeking to support students 'learning to learn' (Coats, 1991) and begun work to incorporate key skills into the curriculum and assessment of certain courses (e.g. MU120; *Open Mathematics*). Following the NCIHE report, these activities have been expanded and include development of Key Skills assessment. However, materials are generic and language courses do not as yet incorporate explicit Key Skills work and assessment.

Key Skills are a significant aspect of the current developments in HE resulting from the NCIHE report, for example, benchmarking and programme specification and personal development plans. 'Learning to Learn' can be seen as the overarching key skill. A review of the literature indicates that critical reflection, active engagement and conscious decision-making are central to this key skill and to notions of effective, 'deep'

learning, language learning and learner autonomy. Personal development plans, to be introduced in HE by 2005/6, are defined in the NCIHE report as

“a supported process of reflection on learning”.

These developments and a review of the literature have led to an exploration of the ways in which OU language students approach their learning, the strategies they employ, the reflective capacities which they demonstrate and the choices they make. This research attempts to understand the extent to which OU language students engage in critical reflection, are actively involved in their learning and display characteristics of ‘deep’ learning. It examines whether these capacities can be enhanced via a specific form of “supported process” and the implications that may have for course design and the role of the tutor within a distance learning context, which is less well represented in existing studies.

Initial Study

In 1998, a group of 11 self-selected tutors adapted the generic DfEE project materials for use by language learners. They then introduced the materials to their students as they felt appropriate and decided how to follow this up during the year. Student use of the materials was voluntary. The impact of the materials for students and tutors was explored. The materials consisted of a *skills audit* for use in identifying study priorities, a *self-assessment* sheet, to be completed and sent in with each assignment, a *reflection* sheet for summarising feedback, reviewing priorities, setting new goals and action plans. There was also a *tips* sheet advising what to do when an assignment is returned and a set of *skills* sheets giving advice and suggesting further ways to enhance/develop specific skills. (See Chapter 3, ‘The Project Materials’ and Appendix 1.) The questions addressed in the initial study were as follows:

- were the materials appropriately adapted for language learners?
- which factors influenced students to use the materials?
- how did students use the materials?

- what were the perceived outcomes for students in relation to their use of course material and tutor feedback, their learning strategies and performance?
- how did tutors use the materials with their students?
- what were the perceived outcomes for tutors?

Findings from this study indicated that, in general, the tutors and those students who used the materials found them very useful and worth using again. Students identified their priorities and were able to see improvements in performance. Tutors noted improved communication with students and some began to give more consideration to learning strategy development in tutorials alongside language skills. Various refinements were suggested, but the basic format of the materials was not questioned. At most, 60 students used some or all of the materials, 26% of the groups involved. Those who did not were mainly concerned about time and workload. Some felt they were already sufficiently skilled language learners. The approach and support of the tutor was a key factor in whether or not students decided to use the materials. The investigation was not able to fully explore the range of strategies used or choices made by students.

Research Questions

The response to the materials in the initial study indicated that they should be revised and offered again in order to encourage more tutors and students to use them more consistently throughout the year. Building on the initial study, this research project sets out to explore the following questions:

1. what do OU language learners actually do to develop their productive (speaking/writing) and receptive (listening/reading) skills, or to enhance their range of expression and grammatical knowledge?
2. to what extent do OU distance language learners demonstrate the capacities of critical reflection and autonomy?
3. to what extent do the language learning materials, activities and assessments in OU Language courses encourage reflection on learning and learner control?

4. what impact do the style and pace of OU Language courses and their assessment have on students' approaches to learning?
5. is it possible to develop the capacity for critical reflection, self-assessment and self-evaluation at a distance?
6. in a distance context, how do tutor expectations and approaches influence learners' use of the project materials and development of capacities for critical reflection and decision-making?

Contribution of the research to the theory and practice of education

The Open University has been offering Language courses since 1995. Since then, it has become the largest provider of part-time language learning in the country. In 1998-9 it accounted for almost 50% of the total part-time funded undergraduate student FTE (HESA, 2001). During this period, the production and presentation of courses leading to diplomas in French, German and Spanish has been paramount. There has been relatively little exploration of how the students approach their study, the strategies they employ or the influence of the tutors who support them (Hurd, 2000: 62). Researchers have stressed the need to

“ask what our students are doing” (McDonough 1999: 14)

and to

“draw directly on students' experience” (Entwistle *et al.* 2001: 114).

Ramsden (1997, 2nd edn.: 205) notes that that we know very little about what students actually do when they are studying outside the classroom, the environment in which OU students work most of the time. Benson (2001: 185) identifies a lack of knowledge about the ways in which language learners motivate themselves or deal with anxieties, or about the role of social and affective strategies. An exploration of what OU language learners actually do to develop their language skills (research question 1) will contribute to the understanding of these issues in a distance learning context.

Benson (2001: 90) notes that researchers such as Kohonen (1992) and Little (1997) view conscious reflection on the learning process as a distinctive characteristic of autonomous learning. He points out (p. 95) that we know very little about what language learners reflect on or how they go about it. Open University course teams espouse the aim of producing courses that foster the development of independent, autonomous learners. Hurd *et al.* (2001: 342) note the difficulty of achieving this aim within the highly structured courses designed for distance learners who work alone for much of the time. By exploring engagement in critical reflection and choices made by students (research question 2), examining the extent to which OU language learning materials and assessments encourage reflection (research question 3) and the influence of the tutor on all these aspects (research question 6) in a distance learning context, the findings from this research will contribute to understanding of the nature and role of reflection and autonomy in distance language learning and to future OU course design and tutor staff development.

Although there has been extensive research into strategies which promote effective language learning and the characteristics of the 'good' language learner, the vast majority of these studies have been carried out with full-time students in institutional classroom settings, often with learners of English as a foreign language. As indicated earlier, work on key skills in modern languages in HE in the UK has concerned classroom or self-access centre settings and employability. This research involves part-time, adult, distance language learners. There have been few studies of what characterises the effective distance language learner (Schrafnagl and Fage, 1998: 68). This research explores the extent to which OU language learners display characteristics of the 'good' language learner.

Studies of approaches to learning have not as yet involved language students e.g., Marton *et al.* (1997, 2nd edn.) and Sternberg and Zhang (2001). Entwistle (2001: 3) notes that research has yet to explore the specific learning processes required to achieve deep learning outcomes within individual disciplines and that there is a need to find out how distance

learning environments influence the ways in which students learn and study. The current ESRC Teaching and Learning Research Programme (*Enhancing Teaching-Learning Environments in Undergraduate Courses*) includes neither languages nor distance learning. The findings from research questions 1, 2, and 4 will enable not only an understanding of the ‘good’ language learner in a distance context, but also the relationship between this concept and a ‘deep’ approach to language learning and the factors which foster deep or surface approaches to distance language learning. The findings from research questions 3, 4 and 6 will contribute to an understanding of how “constructive alignment” (Biggs, 1999: 11) of the different elements of the distance language learning environment may be achieved in order to support deep approaches to language learning.

A number of researchers suggest that it is possible to develop the capacity for critical reflection, self-evaluation and self-assessment (e.g., Boud *et al.*, 1985; Candy, 1991; Race, 1993; Thorpe, 1995; Brockbank and McGill, 1998; Moon, 1999). Results from intervention programmes designed to teach specific language learning strategies have not been conclusive (McDonough, 1995; Chamot, 2001). There appears to be more agreement on the need to raise learners’ awareness of their learning approaches and strategies in relation to specific tasks. The majority of intervention studies have been short-term experiments carried out in institutional settings. Very few researchers examine interventions to enhance the capacity for reflection in a distance context, and those who do (e.g., Thorpe, 1995, 2000) are not concerned with language learning. This research explores the effect of a specific intervention designed to develop the capacity for critical reflection in a distance language learning context (research question 5). It is a naturalistic study rather than an experiment. Wood *et al.* (1998: 698) note the lack of naturalistic studies on self-regulated learning processes, particularly in relation to strategies. Researchers have highlighted the difficulty of reflecting in isolation (Boud *et al.*, 1985; Newton, 1996; Convery, 1998) and the need for some form of dialogue (Brookfield, 1987; Brockbank and McGill, 1998). The findings for research question 5 will help in understanding how critical reflection may be supported at a distance.

Many researchers suggest that it is important to raise awareness of approaches to learning and learning strategies within the context of the discipline studied (e.g., Entwistle and Ramsden, 1983; Boud, 1995; Gremmo and Riley, 1995; Little, 1995, 1996; Holec, 1996; Hounsell, 1997, 2nd edn.; Ridley, 1997; Cohen, 1998; Moon, 1999; Benson, 2001). This requires certain skills on the part of subject teachers and commitment to this approach. As a naturalistic inquiry, this research depends on the willingness and approach of the tutors who introduce the project materials to their students and encourage their use. The findings to research question 6 will help to establish the extent to which these tutors working in a distance context support the development of critical reflection and decision-making. They will indicate the nature of the support and development which tutors may require in this respect. Neither of these aspects has received much attention from researchers as yet.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

THE ROLE OF REFLECTION IN LEARNING

Reflection has become a central concept underpinning many programmes of adult learning, however, it may be interpreted in a variety of ways.

Ecclestone (1996: 154) lists a range of ‘uses’ for reflection including interest, inspiration, cultural breadth, critical analysis and reasoning, social insight and awareness, challenge or critique and to create new knowledge.

Tarvin and Al-Arishi (1991) posed three questions: when does reflection take place, what is the nature of reflection and what is its value? They examined the answers of psychologists and of philosophers such as Husserl, Locke and Schopenhauer and despite differences, noted three common positions. Firstly, that reflection originates when the mind is confronted with a problem or other extraordinary situation; secondly, that in confronting the situation, the mind integrates such functions as defining, comparing, abstracting, generalising and essentiality seeking. These processes allow the mind to make an evaluation or judgement, not just a simple intuitive response. Thirdly, as a result, the problem has a better solution since weakness and errors have been confronted and the extraordinary situation has a richer meaning (1991: 17).

From the humanistic perspective, experience is central to learning and may represent the problem or extraordinary situation referred to above. It may also be something more mundane and ‘everyday’ which evokes an intuitive response, but which can nevertheless be put under the ‘microscope’ and ‘problematized’ in order to re-assess and gain new understanding. Kolb defined learning as

“the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (1984: 38).

He presented a model of a learning cycle/spiral to explain how this transformation takes place. In this cycle, concrete experience is subjected to

reflective observation which leads to abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation, producing a new concrete experience and so on. This can be related to the analytical and evaluative aspects of reflection noted by Tarvin and Al-Arishi. By working through the learning cycle/spiral, conceptual understanding is developed and existing ideas and assumptions are adapted or challenged and replaced by new ways of looking at the world, new knowledge and understanding. Generally, experiential learning has been associated with raising self-awareness and personal growth, but the learning cycle/spiral has been adopted more widely as a tool to enhance the effectiveness of personal learning in a wide range of subjects and professional development programmes in a variety of learning settings.

However, reflection is not only valued in experiential learning. It is also important from the perspective of cognitive conceptions of learning. Here, reflection is the key to a number of metacognitive strategies: planning, goal-setting, reviewing, self-monitoring and self-evaluation. Although the terminology is different and stems from a fundamentally different view of learning, nevertheless, these metacognitive strategies also broadly correspond to the types of activity proposed in the experiential learning cycle/spiral. The growing emphasis on self-direction and autonomy (see below) increases the importance of these metacognitive strategies. Language learning encompasses the acquisition and deployment of receptive and productive language skills as well as knowledge of the language and the culture it represents. It may involve personal growth as individuals become aware of their own capacities or of cultural insights, but this research is concerned with the role of reflection as a personal learning strategy.

In both the humanistic and cognitive conceptions of learning, the term reflection is used to denote processes of which the individual is consciously aware. (Schön, 1983: 50; Boud *et al.*, 1985: 20; Ridley, 1997: 28). Ridley likens reflection to Bruner's (1960) "analytical thinking", as opposed to his alternative of "intuitive thinking", and notes that a similar distinction is made by Vygotsky (1986) between conscious thought processes and an intuitive awareness. Schön talks of two different kinds of thinking involved

in reflection: “reflexiveness” (“the mind’s conversation with itself”, Thorpe, 2000: 82), the purpose of which is to become aware of one’s existing knowledge, skills, attitudes and assumptions, and “critical analysis”, where, assumptions, judgements, application of models and theories are questioned. This is essential if awareness is to lead to learning. Langer, (1989, in Ridley, 1997: 30) suggests that “mindlessness” characterises much of adult behaviour, where we get into a habit of thinking or acting without deliberately reflecting on our actions and behaviour. This research examines a method to help learners give conscious, critical attention to various aspects of their language learning.

Researchers (Van Kleek, 1982, in Ridley, 1997: 45; Boud *et al.*, 1985: 19) have noted that the capacity of individuals to reflect may differ considerably. Van Kleek identifies a range of influences on individual development which may result in this variation. She notes that it cannot be assumed that older, more experienced learners will also be advanced in this respect. Boud *et al.* suggest it may be the capacity for reflection which characterises those who learn effectively from experience. They believe this ability can be developed by working through Kolb’s learning cycle. They also emphasise the need to develop conscious reflection, so that learners can make choices about what they do. They believe that

“the more teachers and learners understand this reflective aspect of learning and organise learning activities which are consistent with it, the more effective learning can be” (1985: 20).

They argue that one of the most effective ways of enhancing learning is to strengthen the link between the learning experience and subsequent reflective activity via specific activities and techniques. Race (1993), Thorpe (1995), Brockbank and McGill (1998) and Moon (1999) present examples of such techniques. However, Thorpe (2000) emphasises that their use has to be underpinned by a rationale that pervades the whole learning programme. Techniques are unlikely to be effective in isolation. OU language courses provide a wealth of language practice activities and a key or model answers which students can use to check their performance.

Checklists are provided for study units so that students can review their learning but there appear to be few attempts to specifically engage the learner in reflecting on aspects of their performance or progress and no guidance as to how that might be done. The project materials, which form the basis of this research, seek to provide a framework for reflection for distance learners by explicitly linking the learning experience of completing an assignment with reflective activity.

Alternative views

Despite the widespread influence of Kolb's learning cycle, the notion of learning through reflection on experience has been criticised in a number of respects. Boud *et al.* (1985: 13) point out that Kolb gives no details about the nature of the 'observation' or 'reflection' in the 'reflective observation' stage in the cycle or what the elements of reflection actually are. Moon (1999), in an extensive examination of reflection in learning, was unable to find a consistently held view of its role (1999: 21). She also pointed out the range of interpretations of 'experience'. As a consequence, Kolb's model has been reinterpreted in a variety of, often conflicting, ways. Holman *et al.* (1997: 136), for example, argue that his experiential learning theory is based on cognitive assumptions about mental processes whereby a person is divorced from their social, historical and cultural context. Brockbank and McGill (1998: 4), on the other hand, advocate the development of experiential learning in HE from a position of social constructivism, believing that

“we are deeply influenced by our life experiences”.

Moon questions whether Kolb's model really concerns guidance, the teaching process or learning. In a summary of accounts of reflection, she commends that by Boud *et al.* (1985) as one of the most comprehensive. They suggest two main stages in 'reflective observation', i.e. 'returning to the experience' and 'attending to feelings', before 're-evaluating the experience'. They argue that the original experience is often given too little attention in the rush to decide what action is needed next. They emphasise the need to recognise and accept feelings generated by the experience before

further learning can take place suggesting that consultation with others may be part of the process. This may be very difficult for distance learners working in isolation.

This leads to a criticism from other researchers such as Brookfield (1987) and Wildemeersch (1989) that this model of learning overemphasises individualism at the expense of collective learning and of ‘conversation’ or ‘dialogue’ which they see as a basic element of human experience and learning. Candy (1991: 302) states that in order to learn something and verify that it has been learned, the learner must engage in dialogue and interaction with others in the community of knowledge users or “community of practice” (Lave and Wenger, 2002). Vygotsky (1986) argues that first and second language acquisition and concept formation occur as the result of interaction, their development is social, not individual. Wildemeersch (1989: 65) criticises Kolb for emphasising the importance of person-environment interaction more than transactions between people. He suggests that ‘conversation’ should be far more important in both experiential and self-directed learning. Brockbank and McGill (1998: 56) agree dialogue is a key requirement for reflection. They distinguish between internal ‘conversation’ and ‘dialogue’ between individuals, stating that

“without dialogue, reflection is limited to the insights of the individual” (1999: 58).

Although these insights are not to be underestimated, there is a danger that reflection may otherwise lead to self-confirmation or self-deception. There are questions about the extent to which such dialogue can be achieved in distance learning and the impact of isolation on the capacity for reflection. It can be argued that language learners necessarily focus on the improvement of individual performance. It is nevertheless vital to be able to interact, whether with other individuals directly, with oral or written materials, or with oneself, in order to develop one’s language skills through reflecting on differences or direct feedback from others.

In a more fundamental criticism from a postmodern perspective, Johnstone and Usher (1997) question the apparently ‘unproblematic’ nature of

experience and the way in which experiential models focus on how it is transformed into knowledge through reflection. They maintain that in these models reflection is used as a tool for abstracting, analysing and processing experience in order to be able to make “legitimate” claims for the knowledge generated. They see this rationalistic reflection as a way of fitting experience into traditional gendered and hierarchical views of knowledge, rather than breaking out of them, essentially a means of control rather than a neutral procedure. Experience is thus divorced from its context and the many possible meanings which it may have and learners’ experience is

“colonised and reduced” (p.143).

As already mentioned, this research is concerned with reflection as a personal learning strategy. As such, it can indeed be viewed as a form of control, a way of structuring study, but where that control is in the hands of the learner. In this context, the issues of isolation and the impact of affective factors in distance language learning are likely to be more significant and these are now examined.

Barriers to reflection

Researchers have noted that many learners have difficulties with this notion. Reflection is found to be

“time-consuming and difficult, challenging many adults’ previous experiences of what learning involves” (Dewar *et al* 1994: 254).

Thorpe (2000: 91) found that when students are required to reflect, they find it surprising, it does not come easily. Matsumoto (1996: 147) notes that language learners tend to just

“go forward, not backward”

i.e. learners do not usually reflect upon their second language learning experiences. Hanson (1996: 105) found that for part-time, mature students

“reflection was not part of their agenda”

due to other pressures on their time and energy as well as expectations formed by previous learning experiences. She asks how, or indeed whether, reflective learning can be fostered in such circumstances. The project materials used in this research may address this question by offering a framework for reflection for adult distance learners who have a wide range of educational backgrounds, personal and work commitments.

Boud and Walker (1993: 79) list a range of potential internal or external barriers. Roberts (2002: 45) agrees with Hanson's learners that there may not be the opportunity, or reflection may not be legitimised by the learning environment. Moon (1999: 166-170) gives a detailed description of the conditions which are needed if deliberate, conscious reflection is to be encouraged. In addition to time and space for reflection, learners need a clear explanation of the purpose and outcomes and support or strategies to guide them. However there is a danger of such guidance leading to mechanical "recipe following" (Boud and Walker, 1993: 85). Some have considered how assessment tasks may be used to develop reflection (e.g., Thorpe, 1995). Others speculate that learners may only engage in reflection if it is assessed (Harrison *et al.*, 2001) and therefore has validity (Roberts, 2002).

Newton (1996) describes her attempts to reflect on experience and how the method caused affective barriers. She was using a reflective journal, a widely advocated method of promoting reflection, but carried out in isolation. She found that she was able to overcome the barriers by changing her method and reflecting with colleagues. This highlights the potential problem of reflecting alone. Convery (1998) suggests that it is difficult for individuals to stand back and take a critical view of their experience and actions. Brookfield (1987) also suggests the need for a "skilled helper". How can such help be made available to distance learners? Can the project materials promote an internal 'conversation' for the learner and 'dialogue' between learner and tutor? Apart from the issue of isolation, Newton's experience indicates that the method of reflection may be a potential barrier.

This is an important consideration. The supporting framework for reflection provided by the project materials may itself prove to be a barrier.

REFLECTION AND LANGUAGE LEARNING

Despite the influence of experiential learning and encouragement of reflection in a broad range of adult learning programmes, its application in the field of language learning has only gathered pace in recent years with an increasing interest in the development of metacognitive strategies. The earlier absence is perhaps due to a perception that language learning is not an area for 'personal growth', as defined in some conceptions of experiential learning, combined with the influence of certain theories of second language acquisition which have not involved or have distinctly discouraged conscious reflection. In the 1960's, language teaching was dominated by behaviourist theories, the Direct Method and audio-lingualism. During the 1970's, Chomsky's work on universal grammar and innate language acquisition devices focused attention on competence, the linguistic system underlying the construction of second language grammar, and away from conscious learning activity by the learner. The focus shifted in the 1980's to authentic language and communication. Research based on methods of investigating first language acquisition indicated that there was a natural acquisition order which could not be altered by explicit grammatical instruction (Ellis 2001a: 3). Krashen's 'Input Hypothesis' (1981) claimed that exposure to 'comprehensible input' was both necessary and *sufficient* for second language learning to take place. He argued that learners had the capacity to 'monitor' their performance and attend to accuracy but that too much monitoring was not conducive to acquisition and fluency. Tarvin and Al-Arishi (1991) suggest that the resulting communicative approach to language teaching emphasises activities which require spontaneous communication at the expense of contemplation.

The importance of reflection has been argued subsequently by those who maintain that interaction, rather than input alone, is necessary but that neither are independently sufficient for effective language learning (Swain, 1985). Researchers began to consider the importance of 'selective attention'

and ‘noticing’ language forms. Long (1996, in Mitchell and Myles, 1998: 134) suggested that

“environmental contributions to acquisition are mediated by selective attention and the learner’s developing processing capacity and that these resources are brought together most usefully, although not exclusively, during negotiation for meaning. Negative feedback obtained during negotiation work or elsewhere may be facilitative of second language development, [...] and essential for learning certain specifiable contrasts between the first and second language”.

‘Environmental contributions’ and ‘negotiation work’ may be equated with Kolb’s ‘concrete experience’. They refer to the input/interaction which a learner is exposed to. ‘Selective attention’ and use of feedback echo the stage of ‘reflective observation’, the comparisons which the learner makes between the languages and the conclusions to be drawn on in subsequent interaction can be compared to ‘abstract conceptualisation’. Experience of language is transformed into knowledge of the language for future use or used to ‘notice gaps’ which need to be filled (Long, 1996 in Ellis, 2001a: 10). Schmidt (1994, in Mitchell and Myles, 1998: 140) maintains that

“more noticing leads to more learning”.

Lightbown and Spada (1993:25) also emphasise the importance of ‘noticing’ similarities and differences between the learner’s first and subsequent languages. This ‘noticing’ may be encouraged by peers or others with whom the learner interacts including teachers.

Second language acquisition researchers (Donato, 1994; de Almeida Mattos, 2000) have explored Vygotsky’s (1986) sociocultural theories of first language development describing a Zone of Proximal Development where the learner is not yet able to function independently, but can achieve the desired outcome given the relevant ‘scaffolded’ help. Their studies have shown that learners can mutually extend their vocabulary or use of constructions through preparing tasks with a peer who suggests alternatives

or draws their attention to matters of grammatical accuracy. Ellis (2001a: 14) describes how, in addition to explicitly teaching language forms, teachers can manipulate meaning-focused communication to include plenty of examples of forms to be 'noticed'. Alternatively episodes of 'noticing' can arise naturally from meaning-focused communication. Williams' (2001a) study of how learners may be prompted to 'notice', or attend to language forms, highlights the importance of the teacher in providing information, recasting, repeating or giving feedback. She points out the need to enhance the learner's role in generating such attention (2001b: 305). This becomes even more crucial in a distance learning context where opportunities for teacher intervention or 'scaffolded' help from peers are limited. Learners need to be prompted to develop selective attention and reflect on the language forms they encounter and produce. Foster and Skehan (1999: 216) note that form-oriented approaches have been replaced by an emphasis on meaningful tasks seeking to balance attention to both accuracy and fluency. They also point out that learners have limited attention capacities and that different aspects of comprehension and language production compete for these capacities. Van Patten (1990, 1996, in Ellis 2001a: 8) suggests that learners have difficulty in attending to form and meaning at the same time and often prioritise one at the expense of the other. This may be important when approaching learning tasks which involve both.

The goal of many language learners is probably to be able to speak or write 'fluently' without having to think about what they are doing. Therefore, perhaps it is no wonder that the development of reflection as a personal learning strategy did not play a major part in discussions about effective language learning previously. A developing research interest in language learning strategies has changed this situation.

REFLECTION: APPROACHES TO STUDY AND LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES

Research on how learning takes place and how languages are acquired has led to interest in how students actually approach their learning, the strategies

they employ and the way in which different approaches to learning influence performance. If certain approaches or strategies can lead to better performance, then perhaps teachers can encourage learners to adopt these approaches and strategies?

Deep and Surface Level Approaches to Learning

Entwistle and Ramsden (1983) summarise a series of studies in the late 70's by Marton *et al.* which distinguished between two approaches to learning: a 'surface' level approach, involving a 'reproductive' conception of learning and a 'deep' level approach whereby the learner focuses on intentional content and comprehending. Entwistle and Ramsden's own large-scale study (1983) of students from a range of faculties (not including modern languages) also identified deep and surface approaches, but added an 'achieving', or strategic approach. In their investigation, a deep approach was defined as demonstrating

“an intention to understand and an ‘active’, critical approach” (Entwistle and Ramsden, 1983: 41).

Such an approach highlights the importance of metacognition which Flavell (1976: 232) defined as

“one's own knowledge concerning one's own cognitive processes and products or anything related to them”.

Entwistle and Ramsden pointed to higher achievement by full-time university students who consistently used a deep approach. Marton and Säljö (1997, 2nd edn.: 49) suggest that the relationship between a deep approach and high quality outcomes is probably an indirect one. A focus on meaning makes study more interesting and satisfying, therefore students do more of it and achieve more, whereas surface study may be boring, and increasingly 'painful' as the volume of memorisation increases (Svensson, 1997, 2nd edn.: 70). This classification of approaches to learning has been drawn on by researchers in both the generic and language specific fields (e.g., Biggs, 1988; Candy, 1991; Eley, 1992; Norton and Crowley, 1995; Ridley, 1997; Moon: 1999, Benson and Lor, 1999).

Biggs (1988: 129) describes how both deep and surface approaches may become 'achieving'. He also notes (p.130) that these approaches are mutually exclusive. He concludes that deep learning is likely to result if students

"become actively involved and reflect upon what they are doing so that they may improve their approach in order to achieve optimal results". (p.135)

Moon (1999: 123) suggests that reflection plays a significant role in the deep approach to learning and that absence of reflection is a defining characteristic of the surface approach. She also suggests that reflection has a role to play in enabling learners to 'up-grade' surface learning. Bowden and Marton (1998: 61) summarise characteristics of a surface approach as reliant on rote-learning, assessment-conscious, fact- and syllabus-bound, not searching for relations between ideas, concentrating on procedures and time limits and learning of details in isolation from each other. Researchers continue to develop and refine the theory of approaches to learning, e.g., Ramsden (1992), Marton *et al.* (1997, 2nd edn.), Bowden and Marton (1998), Biggs (1999, 2001), McCune and Entwistle (2000), Entwistle *et al.* (2001). This research examines how distance language learners approach their study and the extent to which they display the conscious, critical reflection, 'active' involvement and focus on meaning associated with a deep approach to learning.

Entwistle and Ramsden (1983) found that certain styles of teaching and assessment tasks favoured either a deep or surface approach. Ramsden (1992: 44) emphasises that an approach is not a characteristic of an individual learner who may use a different approach in response to different tasks. Researchers have identified factors promoting a surface approach: excessive workload and assessment and a perceived lack of student control in these areas (Biggs, 1988), lack of background knowledge, lack of interest or perceived relevance, lack of confidence in one's ideas and anxiety (Ramsden, 1992). These pressures lead to a desire to simply do the minimum to 'get by'. Moon (1999: 132) also notes interest is likely to

encourage a deep approach and suggests that this may not simply be stimulated by content but also by contact with other interested people and enthusiasts for the subject, a desire to join a “community of practice”. Bowden and Marton (1998: 57) note that, paradoxically, a surface approach seems to originate when demands to prove that one has ‘learned’ dominate the learner’s thinking. They see this as a feature of formal learning, whereas learning situated in real-life practices as expressed in the sociocultural theories of learning (e.g. Lave and Wenger, 2002) does not evoke a surface approach. They nevertheless conclude that this does not mean that all formal education must have such an effect, providing attention is given to the characteristics of the learning environment.

Biggs (1988), Ramsden (1992) and Marton and Säljö (1997, 2nd edn.), suggest the need for reflective activities to promote a deep approach, but identify the difficulties involved. The activities themselves may become the focus and simply enhance surface learning. Beaty *et al.* (1997, 2nd edn.) point out that students study to maximise achievement, but within their own definition of what this means, which may not coincide with the teacher’s. McCune and Entwistle (2000) examined student perspectives and reasons for the apparent ineffectiveness of study advice. They conclude that this may be related to persistence of existing attitudes and habits, the nature of the students’ goals and the level of marks achieved. A student achieving what they perceive as reasonable grades may feel no need to examine their approach. Biggs (2001: 90) maintains that the presence of a surface approach indicates a problem with the teaching and assessment. He suggests a hierarchy of generic activities (p. 89) which can be used to identify the cognitive level and approach of specific learning activities. Approaches to learning may be used as quality indicators in order to achieve the “constructive alignment” (Biggs 1999: 11) of all aspects of the learning environment essential in promoting a deep approach.

The link between assessment and student approaches to learning has been highlighted by many other researchers e.g., Boud (1990), Eley (1992), Gibbs (1992), Ramsden (1992), Norton and Crowley (1995), Kreber (1998),

Moon (1999), Rawson (1999), Rust (2002). OU language courses are perceived by many to have a heavy work and assessment load. This may cause tension for learners who tend towards a deep approach. This research will consider the impact of the style and pace of language courses on students' approaches to learning. It may be that because the project materials focus on assessment tasks, they will appeal to students with a 'surface achieving' approach. Alternatively, they may be viewed as an non-assessed 'extra' and therefore rejected by those with 'more useful things to do with their time' as found by Norton and Crowley (1995: 324) when reviewing attendance at workshops designed to alter students' conceptions of learning.

Entwistle and Ramsden's study noted that what constitutes a deep approach varies between disciplines (1983: 142). Ramsden (1992: 49) agrees that the distinction between deep and surface approaches has to be reinterpreted in relation to different subject areas. For example, in subjects typified as cumulative, paradigmatic, replicable and capable of being summarised in general laws, such as physics (or indeed languages), an initially narrow concentration on the details and logical connections may frequently be part of a deep approach. Current research is examining what constitutes a deep approach in history, media studies, economics, biology and engineering (ESRC, Teaching and Learning Research Programme, Entwistle, 2002). This research provides an opportunity to consider the nature of a deep approach to language learning and its relationship to the concept of the 'good' language learner explored below.

Entwistle and Ramsden (1983) conclude that there is not one 'correct' approach. Students choose an approach depending on their perception of the task. It is not wise to try to change a student's learning style, but

"it is valuable to help students to become more aware of their characteristic style and approach, to show how they may most effectively capitalise on their intellectual strengths" (1983: 206).

They suggest all students will gain from this awareness and from developing flexibility in their approach to learning. Raising awareness via conscious reflection is the aim of the project materials on which this research is based.

Language learning strategies: the ‘good’ language learner

A number of researchers have explored the strategies which successful language learners employ, in order to identify what makes a ‘good’ language learner and therefore how to help less successful learners (Rubin, 1975; Stern, 1975; Naiman *et al.*, 1996, 2nd edn.; Rubin 1981; O’Malley *et al.*, 1985). Rubin (1975) set out a list of seven strategies which she identified as characterising the good language learner. These were confirmed and refined to five by the influential study of adult learners carried out by Naiman *et al.* (1996, 2nd edn.). They found that ‘good’ language learners:

- actively involve themselves in the learning task;
- develop or exploit an awareness of language as a system;
- develop and exploit an awareness of language as a means of communication and interaction;
- succeed in managing the affective demands of language learning;
- constantly monitor their performance and revise their understanding of the second language system.

At the same time, Naiman *et al.* identified a wide range of ‘active’ techniques that these learners used when developing different language skills. The strategies and active techniques of a ‘good’ language learner echo the active involvement and reflection required in ‘deep’ approaches to learning. Both emphasise the need for reflection.

A substantial body of research into strategies used by language learners has followed. For example, Wenden and Rubin (1987), Wenden (1991), O’Malley and Chamot (1990), Oxford (1990), Oxford and Burry-Stock (1995), Oxford and Ehrmann (1995), White (1995, 1997, 1999a,b), Ridley (1997), Cotterall (1999), Bremner (1999), Hurd (2000), Griffiths and Parr

(2001). Oxford and Cohen (1992) point out differences in the ways in which the term ‘strategy’ has been used and the hierarchies of strategies and techniques that have been developed. Cohen (1998: 5) provides a widely used definition of strategies:

“the steps or actions consciously selected by learners either to improve the learning of a second language, the use of it, or both”.

This research explores language *learning* strategies. The typologies of language learning strategies most widely used by researchers are those by O’Malley and Chamot (1990) and Oxford (1990), the latter is used in this research. They overlap to a certain extent but have some significant differences and use different terminology (see Chapter 3, Table 3.1). White (1997) urges the need for consensus on a single typology to allow comparability of research. McDonough (1999: 2) notes that all the current ways of classifying strategies have been criticised. The typologies identify three main categories: cognitive, metacognitive and social/affective strategies.

Cognitive strategies enable learners to comprehend and process information, to store and retrieve items such as vocabulary and to produce appropriate language orally or in writing. Metacognitive strategies include directed or selective attention, planning, self-monitoring and self-evaluation. These could be said to represent, in language learning terms, both the ‘reflective observation’ and ‘abstract conceptualisation’ of Kolb’s learning cycle. Social/affective strategies include co-operation, questioning for clarification, empathising, encouraging oneself and reducing anxiety. These social and affective strategies could be compared to the activity advocated by Boud *et al.* in ‘attending to feelings’ as part of ‘reflective observation’ and their suggestion of the need to involve others.

Researchers have also examined how unsuccessful learners approach their studies. Nyikos (1987, in Oxford and Cohen, 1992: 2) observes that less successful language learners sometimes do not even know what strategies they use or are aware of just a few non-communicative and mundane

techniques such as translation, rote memorisation and repetition. This would seem to reinforce the case for awareness raising (Entwistle and Ramsden, 1983). Sinclair (1996: 149) notes that work by Wenden (1991), Ellis and Sinclair (1989) and Oxford (1990) highlights the need for explicit 'strategy instruction', enabling learners to discover the strategies that suit them best in order to become more effective learners. She points out the difficulty of achieving an explicit focus on learning to learn without overwhelming the language learning aims of a course or presenting the learners with too many hurdles. The survey by Schrafnagl and Fage (1998) found very limited strategy use was widespread, but this did not in any way mean that all the students in their study were unsuccessful. Hurd (2000: 65) suggests the relationship between language proficiency and learning competence is complex, depending on many student variables. It is also important to take into account the nature of the tasks and assessment which learners are presented with and the flexibility of learners' approaches. It may be that the nature of the language learning materials, activities and assessments in OU language courses actually encourage or confirm learners in these limited strategies.

Researchers have considered how best to raise awareness or develop appropriate strategies. Gibbs (1981) criticised the teaching of study strategies and techniques, advocating activities which enable students to reflect on the purpose and nature of their study.

"It is through engaging students in reflecting upon the process and outcomes of their studying that progress is made. Passively following advice results in little reflection and so little improvement" (p.91).

A study by Norton and Crowley (1995) found an awareness-raising programme to be more beneficial to students than a study skills programme.

Many others have advocated the encouragement of reflection or awareness raising and the exploration of study strategies within the subject context rather than separate teaching or advice on study skills, e.g., Entwistle (1987), Martin and Ramsden (1987), Boud (1995), Gremmo and Riley

(1995), Little (1995, 1996), Holec (1996), Ridley (1997), Cohen (1998) and Benson (2001). Holec expresses concern that where strategy development is integrated within the subject, there is a danger that it will be sidelined. However, researchers also maintain that simply raising awareness of or presenting strategies is not enough (Candy, 1991; Chamot, 1993; Matsumoto, 1996; Ridley, 1997; Cohen, 1998). Learners need opportunities to try them out and become confident in using them in order to be able to make choices and apply strategies appropriately. Wood *et al* (1998) note that learners typically use the least sophisticated strategy to achieve a goal, even when they have more available to them and no matter how advanced they are. They suggest this might be due to learners not feeling sufficiently comfortable with certain strategies and a need for more practice. This research is an attempt to raise learners' awareness of their approach and study strategies within a language learning context. It may or may not highlight needs for explicit strategy instruction and practice.

McDonough (1995, 1999) examines research on whether strategy instruction can actually produce better language learners. He suggests evidence for this is increasing (as examples, he quotes Oxford, 1996; Cohen, Weaver and Li, 1996; Nunan, 1997). He also notes studies of successful learners by Naiman *et al.* (1996, 2nd edn.) and Gillette (1987) which do not advocate that others should be taught to use their strategies, rather that students should be encouraged to look more closely at their own behaviour. Oxford and Cohen (1992: 2) consider that strategy 'training' studies in the foreign and second language learning fields (as reported by Cohen, 1990; Chamot and Kuepper, 1989; O'Malley and Chamot, 1990; Tang, 1990) have been successful, but not consistently so. Chamot's survey (2001) confirms this view, but notes a recurrent finding that less successful learners often use strategies as frequently as successful learners but use them differently and do not appear to select appropriately (p. 32). None of the surveys examines studies aimed at awareness raising as opposed to purely strategy instruction.

The value of strategy instruction and the notion of the ‘good’ language learner have also been challenged by researchers with a sociocultural perspective on learning. Gillette (1994) examined the importance of successful and unsuccessful learners’ initial motivation and how this may determine their approach. She argues that the kinds of learning strategy people deploy in learning another language are heavily influenced by their histories and circumstances. Their differing motivations reflect the significance which languages and language study have for their lives. This explains why it may be difficult to teach positive learning strategies to ineffective language learners. Lantolf (2001: 148) expands this argument. Individuals may be in the same group, apparently doing the same task, but cognitively they are not engaged in the same activity, because the activity and its significance to the individual are shaped by their motivations. Donato and McCormick (1994: 454) also argue that since learning strategies develop in the course of goal-directed, ‘situated’ activity, it makes no sense to expect to be able to teach them via direct instruction.

There is general agreement on the importance of raising awareness of learning approaches and strategies in relation to specific tasks, as opposed to strategy instruction. However, the majority of studies have been carried out with full-time students in institutional classroom settings. It may be easier to raise awareness and develop the skills of reflection within this context. It also appears to be important to raise awareness of strategies within the context of the discipline. It seems necessary to offer opportunities for encountering and practising a variety of strategies, otherwise it will be very difficult for learners to discover and try different techniques for themselves and make informed choices about their approach. This research will consider whether the project materials can raise awareness of learning behaviour, the extent to which distance learners are aware of different learning strategies and techniques and make informed, conscious choices about their learning.

REFLECTION AND AUTONOMY IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

Higher Education is placing increasing emphasis on the development of independent, autonomous learners. The National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (1997) recommended that ‘Learning to Learn’ should be developed within the HE curriculum as a Key Skill (recommendation 21). Benefits cited for the development of Key Skills in HE include the improvement of skills associated with studentship as well as the development of skills which are recognised in the workplace (Hodgkinson, 1996). However, Huss (1997: 53) suggests that the motivation for encouraging learner autonomy may not always be a desire to develop self-directed learners with marketable, transferable skills, but the necessity of teaching more students with fewer staff. Some question the theoretical basis for key skills and their transferability (Hyland and Johnson, 1998; Tarrant, 2000). There are concerns that the remit of higher education to develop independent and critical thinking abilities is undermined by promotion of a more skills-based curriculum responding to apparent economic needs (Rawson, 2000: 225). Emphasis on reflection and learning to learn is seen as part of an agenda to promote flexibility in order to facilitate economic and social change (Edwards, 1997, 1998).

Candy (1991: 32) and Harrison (1996: 271) note a convergence of factors contributing to the growing interest in self-direction and autonomy as a field of practice and research. This is manifested in the references to autonomy in the benchmark statements of the outcomes which graduates of a specific subject should demonstrate. The statement for Languages and Related Studies (QAA, 2002) says

“ an explicit expectation of students of LRS is a degree of learner autonomy and responsibility for the development of their language competence through independent study”
(section 2.5, p.3).

A graduate in this discipline will be expected to be

“an effective and self-aware independent learner” (section 6.3, p.13).

As explained in Chapter 1, the impetus for this research project sprang from developments in Key Skills. However there has long been an interest in autonomy, and its role in learning in general and in language learning in particular. As evidence of this interest, Cotterall and Crabbe (1999: 5) list books and collections of papers from 1987 onwards on autonomy in language learning.

Most language researchers use Holec's definition of autonomy

"the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (1980: 3).

The concept of 'knowing how to learn' is central to this definition. Holec views autonomy as a capacity that needs to be acquired, rather as Boud *et al.* view reflection. He sees 'self-directed learning' as the way those who have this capacity go about their learning. Researchers stress that self-direction does not mean learning on one's own. Candy (1991: 73) distinguishes between autonomous learning as a goal or a teachable capacity and autonomous learning as a method or learning experience. Within a formal learning setting, he characterises the former as "self-management" and the latter as "learner control". Candy also reminds us that autonomy may describe the situation in which the learner is able

"to choose between dependence and independence as he (or she) perceives the need" (p.21).

As Kohonen (2001: 39) notes, some are likely to be more comfortable with a responsible role as self-directed and autonomous learners due to their personal histories, whereas others may opt for a more dependent role. Learners may be encouraged to make choices on the basis of conscious reflection, but ultimately this may include the rejection of reflective, self-directed approaches. This research explores the extent to which self-management can be encouraged through the project materials, and the extent to which OU language courses promote self-management or learner control.

Hurd *et al.* (2001: 344) believe

“there is now an overwhelming consensus among researchers in the field of language learning and teaching on the benefits of an autonomous approach”.

A number of writers have given reasons for the significance of autonomy for language learners. Little (1990: 7-8) lists general educational and psychological arguments in favour of citizens who can think and act for themselves and efficient learners who know how to draw on existing knowledge to tackle new learning tasks. His linguistic arguments highlight the need for learners who can communicate effectively in the wide range of circumstances where they have to be self-reliant. Others agree with Little (Oxford, 1990; Victori and Lockhart, 1995; Grenfell and Harris, 1999) that the autonomous learner is the one most likely to make the transition from language learner to language user, able to function independently in the target language, making choices about what is said and done. Benson (2001: 19) suggests that successful learners are increasingly seen as those who can construct knowledge directly from experience of the world rather than those who respond well to instruction. Littlewood (1996: 431) summarises the three broad domains of autonomy in a foreign language context: autonomy as a communicator, autonomy as a learner and autonomy as a person. This research is concerned with the second of these domains.

Despite such interest in autonomy and its significance in language learning, there are alternative views. Benson (2001) notes that the development of autonomy, like reflection, has been criticised because of its close association with the individualisation of learning. He sees one of the most challenging developments in the theory of autonomy in the 1990s as the idea that autonomy implies interdependence. He quotes Kohonen (1996, in Benson, 2001: 14)

“autonomy includes the notion of interdependence, that is, being responsible for one’s own conduct in the social context: being able to collaborate with others and solve conflicts in constructive ways”.

The context of intercultural communication in which language learners operate makes this particularly relevant. He also quotes Little (1996, in Benson, 2001: 14)

“the development of a capacity for reflection and analysis, central to the development of autonomy, depends on the development of an internalisation of a capacity to participate fully and critically in social interactions”.

Lantolf (2001: 148-9) suggests that from a sociocultural perspective, an isolated human mind, functioning with complete autonomy from other minds is an impossibility. Even when people think alone, the activity

“carries with it the historical consequences of other mediation”.

Whether from an individual or collaborative, psychological or political perspective, Dam (1990: 7) points out that autonomy involves the capacity for critical reflection on all aspects of the language learning process

“which syllabuses and curricula frequently require, but traditional pedagogical measures rarely achieve”.

Little (1990: 12) reminds us, however, that accepting responsibility for one’s own learning may be the last thing learners want. He feels this should not surprise us as autonomy implies a challenge to certainties that can be very difficult. Candy (1991: 221) notes a common research finding that students initially dislike greater responsibility. He describes a

“challenging and unsettling transition for learners” (p.224)

and feels one cannot overestimate the impact of previous experience.

Researchers also point out the differences in capacity for self-regulation between individuals who may also vary in degrees of autonomy from one situation to another (Horowitz, 1989; Candy, 1991; Ridley, 1997), perhaps displaying a higher degree of autonomy in their working life than when they join a formal educational course. Other researchers (Cotterall, 1995; Wenden, 1998, Yang, 1999) provide evidence that learners’ beliefs about language learning influence their readiness to take responsibility and their

confidence in their ability to do so. Attribution theory (Dickinson, 1995: 171) suggests that where learners believe their lack of success is beyond their control due to fixed, unchangeable causes such as their own lack of aptitude, or the difficulty of the task, they are easily discouraged and give up or vice versa. Grenfell and Harris (1999: 73) argue that developing learners' strategies and encouraging them to take responsibility is a way of providing learners with a means of control.

The strategies and qualities attributed to 'good' language learners include willingness to 'take responsibility' through planning, monitoring and assessing performance. Cotterall (1995: 199) sees the link between autonomous and successful language learners as their capacity for self-monitoring and self-assessment. Other researchers, (Wenden, 1998; Rivers, 2001; Hurd *et al.*, 2001), also link success in language learning with self-assessment, self-management and autonomy. Learning is strongly influenced by the socio-emotional context in which it occurs (Boud *et al.*, 1985; Oxford, 1990; White, 1999a,b). A supportive context is needed if learners are to accept the process of self-assessment and develop the self-confidence, self-esteem and critical reflection which it entails. Ushioda (1996, in Benson 2001: 70) suggests that learners who know how to limit the emotional damage of negative affective experiences are at a considerable advantage.

Boud (1995) points out that part-time students are often under severe time pressures. They have limited opportunities to stand back and self-assess, unless this is built in to the course (p.110), which at the same time legitimises such activity in the eyes of learners. These arguments echo the earlier discussion of how pressure and anxiety contribute to adoption of a surface approach to learning. MacIntyre and Gardner (in Benson, 2001: 71) observed that students in foreign language classrooms tend to report greater anxiety than in other subjects due to the close relationship between self-concept and self-expression. Broady (1996: 223) points out that the majority are uneasy about assessing their own work, but can develop their confidence through practice, although opinions and beliefs may be difficult to change

(Cotterall, 1995: 201). Others agree that students need to learn to self-assess and need opportunities for practice (Race, 1993; Little, 1995; Gibbs, 1995; Thorpe, 2000; Rust, 2002).

Candy (1991: 119) maintains that certain aspects of autonomy, including reflection, can be developed through educational intervention. Nunan (1996) describes an example where undergraduate learners of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) were encouraged to self-monitor and self-evaluate through guided journals. These learners became sensitised to the learning process, were able to make more effective use of the English they were learning and became able to articulate what and how they wanted to learn. The degree to which the reflective activity fostered autonomy varied dramatically from one learner to another, leading Nunan to agree with Dickinson (1987) on the importance of attitude to and desire to develop the capacity for autonomy. Nunan concluded (1996: 20) that autonomy is enhanced when learners

- are actively involved in producing the target language;
- have opportunities to activate their language outside the classroom,
- select content and learning tasks and evaluate their own progress;
- are encouraged to find their own language data and create their own learning tasks;
- are encouraged to self-monitor and self assess.

This learner profile clearly has a close relationship to that of the ‘good’ language learner and the ‘deep’ approach to learning.

To explore the relationship between ‘learner control’ and successful language learning, Rowsell and Libben (1994) examined the independent learning strategies used by a group of successful and a group of unsuccessful learners. They analysed learners’ diaries for actions which took control of the pedagogical activities associated with language learning (e.g. deletion, addition, repetition, transposition or change of the set tasks). They also looked for actions which took control of functional activities (e.g.

creating some form of meaningful interaction or providing meaningful context or background to assist with learning the target language). Rowsell and Libben found that there were no significant differences between the groups with respect to pedagogical actions, both groups appeared to ‘trust’ the methods prescribed by the book (1994: 681). However, successful learners recorded many more instances of taking functional control. Yang (1999) found that students with strong self-efficacy beliefs reported high levels of functional practice and suggested that success in functional activity in turn strengthened that belief. The meaning focus of functional practice is also likely to link it to a deep approach to learning.

Dickinson (1987: 5) distinguishes between learner-centred instruction, characterised by modes giving responsibility to the learner, and materials-centred instruction where the teacher’s role is built into the materials. Open University students are clearly working with the latter although apparently working independently. This research will explore the extent to which distance language learners demonstrate the capacities of autonomy and critical reflection by taking control of pedagogical and functional actions. It will also identify the extent of explicit decision-making opportunities within the course materials. It will examine whether the intervention of the project materials can enhance learners’ ‘self-management’ and ‘control’ by promoting conscious learning choices. As the project materials are not an integral part of the course they may, therefore, be seen as dispensable by part-time distance learners under pressure. Furthermore, in a distance context, it may not be possible to create the supportive climate needed for the development of critical reflection, self-assessment and self-evaluation which are seen as the key to the development of autonomy in language learning.

REFLECTION AND THE ROLE OF THE LANGUAGE TEACHER

A number of researchers have examined the teacher’s role in the development of reflection, autonomous learning, learning strategies and approaches. Holec, (1996: 91) indicates the need for a different approach by language teachers to facilitate self-directed learning. Dickinson (1987:122)

examines the issue of teacher preparation and readiness to support and develop decision-making and autonomous learning. He suggests that teachers may need to be made aware of the impact this can have on learning and become convinced of its value when they may not have experienced such approaches themselves as learners. This requires both psychological and methodological preparation which may take longer than attendance at one or two workshops. Moon (1999) and Brockbank and McGill (1998) highlight the need for teachers to explicitly model critically reflective learning if learners are to engage in it. The latter present activities which teachers may use in order to develop their own capacity for critical reflection if they lack this experience. Other researchers (Riley, 1999; Thorpe, 2000; Chamot: 2001; Hyland, 2001; George, 2001) also emphasise the importance of support and development for teachers if they are to encourage reflection, self-direction and self-assessment among learners.

However, teachers may react to these notions in similar ways to learners. As de los Angeles-Clemente (2001: 50) points out,

“when a teacher is introduced to an innovation, when s/he has to change her/his habitual way of doing things, s/he feels threatened”.

Candy (1991: 224) feels teachers may find it harder to adapt to a role where they help learners to make decisions rather than making the decisions themselves. He suggests that in order to make this transition teachers must believe that learner control is important and they must trust people to learn responsibility and self-direction. They must have an experimental attitude, be willing to make mistakes, and provide opportunities for self-direction. A teacher must also be moving towards becoming a self-directed learner (p.231). For Little (1995:179), learner autonomy depends on teacher autonomy. By this he means that teachers should have strong sense of personal responsibility for their teaching.

Wilcox (1996) surveyed teachers in an HE institution, and found that the attitudes of 87% did not appear to support self-directed learning. Where individuals displayed attitudes fully supportive of self-directed learning,

their instructional practices did not always match their apparently strong beliefs. Candy (1991: 241) explores the notion of ‘pseudoautonomy’ and suggests that teachers do not deliberately mislead learners or subvert autonomy but are often unaware of the disjunction between their ‘espoused theory’ and their ‘theory-in-action’ (Argyris and Schön, 1974). Teachers might support the notion of critical reflection and learner control at an intellectual level without being fully aware of the implications for their students and themselves. November (1997) describes how even a high level of commitment and understanding may not fully translate into practice. If teachers are not really committed to these notions, Brockbank and McGill (1998: 157) point out that it is impossible for them to hide their personal stance as

“students are acute non-verbal observers”.

Brockbank and McGill (1998: 30) also describe how this phenomenon extends to departments and institutions where despite a discourse of critical reflection and autonomous learning, the course work and assessment

“actually values dependency, identification and representation”.

Students are quick to respond to the ‘hidden’ curriculum. However,

“where learners are perceived by the teacher as committed to the achievement of learning objectives, as seeking and accepting responsibility, and as persons able to exercise control and self-direction, they will behave in a way which confirms this perception” (Dickinson 1987: 25).

The quality of all aspects of the learning environment is crucial to the attitudes and approaches adopted by learners (Ramsden, 1997, 2nd edn.; Biggs, 1999). In particular, teachers need to be aware of factors which encourage a surface approach (Biggs, 1988: 135).

Nunan (1997: 72) and Brockbank and McGill (1998: 155) point out the need for teachers to become aware of the approaches and strategies that underlie their practices, so that these can be made explicit. Nunan felt that students

were constrained by what teachers allowed them to do and speculated that students working in self-study mode and given opportunities to learn and apply strategies independently might develop a greater capacity for reflection and self-evaluation. In an OU context, tutors have no direct control over the coursework or assessment strategy.

In a survey of research on strategy teaching, Chamot (2001: 39) found that teachers believed they were engaged in activity to develop learning strategies, but did not actually make this development explicit to learners. Teachers tended to be unsure about the scope and sequence of such development work at different levels and perceived activity to develop learning strategies as an 'extra'. Ho (1997) speculated that closer integration of strategy development within the subject curriculum would foster acceptance by staff as well as students, but teachers need support to achieve this. Little (1999: 2) favours such integration but suggests that for teachers

“a pedagogic decision of some risk has to be taken to devote teaching time to strategy training rather than language learning, and the pay-off is not secure”.

Such concerns and beliefs on the part of tutors will add to the potential for disjunction between espoused theory and theory-in-action.

This research will explore teacher support for self-directed learning. It will examine the ways in which tutors' expectations and approaches influence learners' use of the project materials, and their development of conscious reflection and decision-making. This takes place in a distance setting where tutor-student contact is limited and course materials, prepared by a central course team, provide the main subject teaching. It would be relevant to explore the ways in which the awareness and experience of course team members are reflected in the materials, but that is beyond the scope of this research.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Norton and Crowley (1995: 307) note that research in student learning has moved away from an observational to an experiential approach, exploring how the learner perceives reality. A number of researchers advocate examining learners' experience of specific tasks in day-to-day study contexts in order to understand the learning process more fully, how learners motivate themselves and how they deal with their anxieties (e.g., Lo Castro, 2001; McCune and Entwistle, 2000; Entwistle *et al.*, 2001; Benson, 2001). Wenden and Rubin (1987: 3) summarised research in second language learning and teaching from the early seventies onwards. They found the focus had shifted from a preoccupation with teaching methods to an interest in learner characteristics and their possible influence on second language acquisition. As illustration, they quote research on attitude and motivation (Gardner and Lambert, 1972), social factors (Schumann, 1978), learners' cognitive abilities (Oller and Richards, 1973; Reid, 1985), language processing strategies (Winnitz *et al.*, 1981), communication repair strategies (Faerch and Kasper, 1983). None of this research examined the process of second language learning from the learner's point of view, or looked at learners' conscious strategies when completing a learning or communication task. McDonough (1995, 1999) summarised subsequent research on language learning strategies and skills development. He indicated that Hosenfeld's remark remains valid.

“Too often our focus has been on what students should be doing; we must begin by asking what our students are doing” (1976, in McDonough 1999: 14).

This research adopts an experiential approach. It can be described as an exploratory-interpretative study (Grotjahn, 1987: 59-60) in that it is non-experimental, produces qualitative data and uses interpretative analysis.

Nunan (1992) notes the difficulty of maintaining such categorisations. He agrees with Van Lier (1988, 1990, in Nunan, 1992: 5) that applied linguistic research can be analysed in terms of interventionist/selectivity parameters rather than a quantitative/qualitative paradigm. That is, the extent to which the researcher intervenes in the learning environment and the degree to which the researcher pre-specifies the phenomena to be investigated. This study can be described as naturalistic, as defined by Norton and Crowley (1995: 311). It focuses on an intervention that is an optional ‘tool’ for learners. It can only be considered experimental in the sense that learners could opt in or out of using the project materials and therefore there is the opportunity to not only evaluate the impact of the materials but also compare the learning strategies between users and non-users. In neither case was the learner’s behaviour ‘controlled’.

The phenomenon under investigation is how adult distance language learners go about their learning. The research is based on learner’s descriptions of how they learn, rather than on observations. This raises issues of ‘truth’ and reliability. Tett (2000: 184) points out that working with learners’ descriptions of their experience means working with their construction of reality. Boud (1995: 30) also notes that all experience is evaluated and influenced by the learner’s unique past. Weil (1993: 175) suggests that adults are their experience. Griffiths (1998: 46) emphasises that

“all facts and information are value-laden, but this is not helpfully described as ‘bias’ since in this context, the sense of the term ‘bias’ depends on the possibility of a neutral view”.

She argues that ‘perspective’ is a better description than ‘bias’. This requires acknowledgement of the beliefs and assumptions shaping the research and the ability to be open to other perspectives. Boud (1995: 57) also emphasises that our understanding of learners’ understanding of a phenomenon is filtered by our own views of that phenomenon.

This investigation reflects the belief that learners' perceptions of what they do and why are more significant than any external or 'objective' picture of what happened, since their perspectives strongly influence their approach. As Boud (1995: 15) states,

“ultimately it is only the decisions which learners make about what they will or will not do which actually influence the outcomes of their learning”.

This research also explores an attempt to raise learners' awareness of their purpose, approach, strategy and techniques, as advocated by Entwistle and Ramsden (1983), Wenden and Rubin (1987), Wenden (1991), Ellis and Sinclair (1989) and Oxford (1990). The project materials are intended to encourage language learners to reflect on and make decisions about their learning. This could be described as “committed” research (Griffiths, 1998: 3), as I believe that this intervention has the potential to bring change in learners' awareness and approaches which they will find beneficial. The project materials have therefore been presented in a positive light with an emphasis on likely benefits. Both tutors and students need to be enthused to use them, if this belief is to be tested. Although researchers are unlikely to introduce materials that deliberately impede learning, it is important to recognise that learners and teachers may not perceive such interventions as beneficial. Norton and Crowley (1995) point out that such naturalistic studies depend on the commitment and enthusiasm of tutors working with learners. If this is lacking or the nature of the intervention is misunderstood, the investigation and the findings will be adversely affected.

The intervention aims to improve learners' effectiveness, but what constitutes improvement as far as learners are concerned? The intention is to enable learners to take greater control of their own learning in order to become more effective learners, but this challenges existing relationships between learner and teacher, learner and course material, in ways which may be rejected. Researchers such as Edwards and Usher (1994) and November (1997) highlight the tension between encouraging learners to take responsibility for their own learning, but prescribing a method for doing so. It can be argued that a set framework of activities may force

students into a particular way of working rather than enhancing their autonomy. The project materials represent a particular perspective on effective learning, hence use of these materials has been entirely optional. The research is not based on the premise that critical reflection on experience is the only route to successful language learning. However, its significance in the literature suggests that its relevance to language learning should be explored and distance language learners should be offered the opportunity to enhance their learning by developing the capacity for such critical reflection.

Listening to learners' perspectives is the only way to identify effects on learning attributable to use of the project materials. Bremner (1999) notes that a correlation between proficiency in a language and particular strategy use does not necessarily suggest causality in a particular direction. Ridley (1997: 13) suggests that many individual learner differences influence strategy use and affect learning outcomes and success rates. These have been explored by a number of researchers, e.g, motivation (Gillette, 1994), attitudes and beliefs (Horowitz, 1987; Cotterall, 1995; White, 1999a, Yang 1999), gender and cultural background, past language learning experience and personal circumstances (Green and Oxford, 1995; Oxford and Ehrman, 1995; Oxford, 1996) learning styles (Jamieson, 1992) and learning setting (White, 1995). The naturalistic approach adopted for this research excludes attempts at correlation between use of the project materials and student performance. It does not seek to relate strategy use and particular personal characteristics or previous experience but concentrates on the question of how distance language learners approach their study. At the same time, it considers whether it is possible to raise awareness of strategies and encourage choice, which may perhaps result in a change in behaviour and attitudes. Wenden (1999: 441) suggests that future research should examine the extent to which learners' active involvement in the regulation of their learning leads to change in their beliefs and knowledge about language learning. This research will examine the learners' view of the project materials which seek to encourage 'self-management' and explore the extent to which learners' knowledge and beliefs appear to have changed.

The findings generated by this research will be examined in the light of findings from other studies to further illuminate reflection, approaches to language learning and strategy use in a distance language learning context. In the words of Strauss and Corbin (1990: 58)

“although a beginner cannot expect to make ‘great’ discoveries, with enough hard work and persistence a researcher is capable of making contributions to his or her field of interest”.

METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

Various methods may be used to find out what learners do and how they learn. Cohen (1987) categorises them as observation methods and types of verbal reports by the learner. Observable behaviour does not necessarily reveal the learning process (Marton and Säljö, 1997, 2nd edn.; Cohen, 1987; Nunan, 1992; Matsumoto, 1994). Chamot *et al* (1985) and Naiman *et al.* (1996, 2nd edn.) found that direct observation in language classes produced very little information about the strategies learners employ to learn a language and Graham (1997: 43) abandoned it as totally unproductive. In this research, direct observation was also ruled out because learners were studying at a distance and only occasionally came together in tutorials.

These researchers agree with Nunan (1992) and Faerch and Kaspar (1987) that some form of verbal report by the learner is essential, since choices are made in learners’ heads. The resulting action may be observable, but how they reached that point is not. Cohen (1987: 32) identifies three types of verbal report data through which researchers may access learners’ conscious strategies. These are: self-report, where learners give general descriptions of what they do based on their beliefs rather than on observations of a specific event; self-observation, where learners inspect specific language behaviour during or after the event, and self-revelation, where learners ‘think aloud’ in stream of consciousness disclosure of thought processes while the information is being attended to. The main distinction is whether the reports are retrospective or concurrent with language study.

In this research it was considered impractical to collect data while learners were in the process of carrying out language tasks. Due to the distance learning context they would have to make their reports in isolation from the researcher or a tutor. When using such methods, learners are normally briefed and given an opportunity to try self-observation or self-revelation to ensure that appropriate data is gathered in a useful format. Cohen (1998) and Ashworth and Lucas (2000) point out that researchers cannot assume key concepts in a discipline are understood and have the same meaning for learners. This emphasises the importance of briefings before this kind of data is collected and opportunities for clarification. However, Matsumoto (1994: 371) notes that 'informant training' may simply encourage respondents to fulfil the researcher's expectations. There are also concerns that asking people to report on what they are doing, while they are doing it, can affect their performance of the task. In any case, such briefing was not possible in the context of this study. Moreover, many distance learners already handle considerable pressures and it was not felt that this additional dimension to their tasks was justifiable.

McDonough (1995) lists methods for gathering verbal report data retrospectively as learner diaries, logs or journals, questionnaires and interviews. A number of researchers (Cohen, 1987; Nunan, 1992; Matsumoto, 1994; McDonough, 1995) have discussed the problems associated with these methods. Learner diaries, logs or journals can require 'informant training' and therefore suffer from the 'reactive effect' noted above. There is an issue about who sees the diary and how often and what use can be made of entries. Diaries are, as Nunan notes, normally kept by learners and read by teachers as part of an on-going dialogue, rather than read by a third party. In this research, it was felt that keeping and reading diaries would place too great an additional demand on the students and tutors.

The remaining methods, questionnaires and self-report in retrospective interviews, were chosen for this study. Both raise issues about memory and

the reliability of data gathered. Where interviews take place some time after a learning task, it is possible that memory is affected

“because the person recalling it has new experiences, ideas and beliefs to form the context for the memory” (Hage and Meek, 1993: 77).

Matsumoto (1994) considers two possibilities. Firstly

“informants may know more than they can tell” (p.373).

He lists factors that may contribute to this situation: time lapse and intervening experience; questions may be too general and not evoke detailed recall of activity; informants may not be able to express themselves or their actions well. Secondly

“informants may tell more than they know” (p.375),

perhaps because they wish to represent themselves as ideal learners, or avoid saying anything to the detriment of their teacher, or because cueing from the researcher hints at a desired response. McDonough (1995: 10) suggests that learners’ observations of their own behaviour are unreliable. Since this study is framed within an exploratory-interpretative approach which seeks to examine the learners’ perspectives as explained above, this was not felt to be problematic, but efforts were made to overcome the factors listed by Matsumoto.

The questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with students were administered as soon as possible after the courses had finished to reduce the time lapse. Interviews with tutors were carried out during the course. Interview questions asked for information about specific activities or materials, providing a clear prompt to aid recall. Semi-structured interviews allowed for clarification when informants had difficulty expressing themselves. Care was taken not to use technical language terms in interviews with students. There was no incentive for students to embellish or invent behaviour as the course had finished and the information would not affect their results or their relationship with their tutor. Oxford and Burry-Stock (1995: 2) note that studies (Chamot and Kuepper, 1989;

O'Malley and Chamot, 1990) carried out in situations where no grades or sanctions were involved showed that language learners were capable of remembering their strategies and describing them lucidly. Matsumoto (1994: 377) quotes Ericsson and Simon (1980) who maintained that introspective verbal reports were a valuable and thoroughly reliable source of information providing they were elicited with care and interpreted with full understanding of the circumstances under which they were obtained. These include the role of the researcher and their relationship with the students and tutors involved.

The Role of the Researcher

Grotjahn (1987: 65) points out that, in the context of exploratory-interpretative methodology, the validity of verbal report data depends on an appropriate communicative relationship being established between the researcher and the informant. Nunan (1992) draws attention to the influence of factors such as gender and cultural background as well as the unequal relationship that exists where the researcher controls the interview and content of the questionnaire. He suggests that using a semi-structured approach can restore a degree of control to the respondent. The researcher, the tutors and the majority of students in this study are female, a feature of the OU Department of Languages. Although cultural issues do not appear influential in this study since the researcher and subjects share a European and for the most part British cultural background, issues of inequality could have a potentially strong effect and are explored here.

Relationship with Tutors

I am both the researcher and the manager of the tutors and language programmes in the OU South region. I chose to introduce the project materials to students via their tutors rather than via separate workshops. A number of researchers (e.g. Cohen, 1998; Boud, 1995; Matsumoto, 1996; McAvinia and Oliver, 2001) argue that attempts to develop learning strategies are more likely to succeed where they are fully integrated or 'situated' within a course of study and therefore perceived as relevant. Since

Open University language courses are centrally produced for a lifespan of 5 - 8 years, full integration was out of the question, but I felt that the project materials would have more immediate relevance when presented by the regular tutors. This approach relied heavily on the willingness of tutors to become involved.

A precursor to the initial study, carried out in 1998 (EdD Part A, E835) examined ethical and methodological issues involved in carrying out such research via the tutors. It explored the acceptability of asking tutors to introduce and support use of the project materials for no extra pay, whether tutors felt under pressure to participate because of my managerial position, and whether tutors in turn pressurised students to participate.

That study found that despite the absence of additional pay, tutors were motivated to participate for a number of reasons. These were: a general interest in how people learn; a desire to help students improve their study strategies; a desire to promote contact with their students; the opportunity to work with colleagues on the development of the materials; a desire to develop their own teaching by keeping up with current developments and reviewing their practice. Predictably no-one admitted to feeling under pressure from me to participate and some strongly refuted such a suggestion:

"I wouldn't have joined in if I hadn't thought it could be beneficial".

However, other pressure was evident in their desire to keep up-to-date. The majority were 'portfolio workers' with a range of part-time employment. They felt that such professional development would also help them in their other jobs or in securing other employment.

Dockrell (1988) outlines ethical criteria in relation to subjects and colleagues. Subjects should fully understand what is being asked of them and be fully aware of their role and that of the researcher. They must know and agree what will be disclosed about them. They must understand what benefits the research may bring to them. The research should not make

excessive demands on the subjects' time and resources. Colleagues should have access to the findings of the research including details of how the data was gathered and analysed. Tutors were both subjects and colleagues in this research. Those who were interested were informed of the nature and purpose of the research via briefing meetings which explained what was required of them. Possible benefits of the research were discussed. Participation was voluntary. Time and travel costs for meetings and any work done towards adapting the materials were paid. Tutors were assured that the views and information given in interviews would remain anonymous. Tutors were invited to presentations about the findings.

Tutors were advised that there were no prizes for getting lots of students to use the project materials and no penalties for low take up. The numbers of students opting to use the materials varied widely from a single student user to 50% of a group or more which indicated absence of tutor 'pressure'. During the interviews, although tutors were positive about the project materials and their impact, there was evidence that they felt able to express their own views. They criticised aspects and suggested improvements. They expressed doubts and disagreed with me over how various issues might be accounted for or addressed. I, therefore, felt confident that they saw my role more as a fellow professional who recognised that they had the *practical* experience of piloting the project materials.

Relationship with Students

Although I do not have a direct relationship with the students, they know me as the manager of the language programmes. This may have influenced their decision to complete questionnaires or participate in interviews. In accordance with Dockrell's (1988) ethical criteria, students were informed of the purpose of the research and the potential benefits to other learners. They were told the approximate length of the interviews and asked to suggest a convenient time. Their permission was sought before interviews were recorded. Time was allowed to put students at their ease and for them to raise any other issues in relation to courses/study with the OU once the main interview was over. Information was gathered once courses and final

assessments were complete, so that there would be no concerns about their results or relationships with tutors. The fact that I had previously taken the French courses as a student proved helpful in establishing a more equal relationship.

The Students

The research was carried out with language students registered with the Open University in the South (see Appendix 2). OU students may be any age over 18. Their educational experience is very varied due to the open entry policy and may range from no formal qualifications to a higher degree. Language students are expected to have knowledge of the language they intend to study, equivalent to GCSE level, before embarking on a course. This may have been gained through informal learning while living abroad or through family ties, though many have attended formal classes in adult, further or higher education as well as having learned the language at school. Language qualifications range from no formal qualifications to a degree in another language. Students were registered on all the language courses offered in 1999 listed in Appendix 3.

Studying a language at a distance

Students work through course materials consisting of printed texts, audio and video material. A course guide gives general advice on how to use the materials and each student receives a copy of the *LLGSG*. To support them in their studies, each student is assigned a tutor and 2-3 hour tutorials are scheduled approximately once a month with occasional day schools. Attendance is optional. Students can contact their tutor by phone, e-mail or post between tutorials if they have questions or difficulties and need assistance. Student contact details are circulated within the group, where permission has been given, to facilitate contact between students and the formation of self-help study groups. Students receive a detailed study calendar. At regular intervals, they complete oral and written assignments, based on text or taped stimulus materials, which are marked by their tutor. Appendix 4 explains the nature and frequency of assignments. These are

judged on both content and language. Appendix 5 summarises the marking criteria.

Sample selection

Originally the research relies on an ‘opportunity’ sample. Questionnaires were sent to all those students in groups taught by tutors who opted to introduce the project materials for whom the University Student Project Research Panel (SPRP) gave survey permission, 303 in total. Interviews were arranged with a number of students who expressed interest/willingness to participate via the questionnaire. Attempts were made to ensure that sampling was

“representative, intentional and systematic” (Hammersley, 1984: 53 in E835: 92).

Students of each language and level of study were selected on the basis of their replies (extremely positive or negative, or indicating interesting avenues to follow up) to give approximately similar numbers of non-users (15) and users (17) of the project materials, including males and females. (See Appendix 6.) Ashworth and Lucas (2000: 300) suggest that selection of participants should

“avoid presuppositions about the nature of the phenomenon [under investigation] or of the conceptions held by particular ‘types’ of individual, while observing common-sense precautions about maintaining ‘variety’ of experience”.

They argue that as the experience of each individual will be different, it makes no sense to try for ‘statistical sampling’ when investigating experience. Hence this research has attempted to maintain variety and keep open potential avenues for exploration through the choice of interviewees. The fact that students could choose to use the materials or not offers the opportunity to compare the experience and understandings of both groups. Norton and Crowley (1995: 325) suggest that researchers should look more

closely at those students who do not take up the opportunities which such materials or special workshops provide.

In view of tutors' crucial role in the research, interviews were carried out with all involved to explore their experience and perspectives. This provides a point of comparison with the students, particularly in relation to the nature of the project materials and how students used them. Respondent validation of data gathered from interviews was not carried out. It would have been difficult to achieve within a space of time that made it meaningful to the people concerned and would represent a further imposition on their time.

The Project Materials

Appendix 1 contains a set of the project materials. They are designed to raise learners' awareness of language skills, and to develop conscious reflection and informed decision-making about their learning. To achieve this, they encourage learners to carry out specific tasks at intervals throughout their study in conjunction with their 'normal', regular study activity. This was felt to be practical and feasible for distance learners. The tasks based on the materials were as follows:

- A 'skills audit' encouraged students to identify the skills needed when completing an assignment, to reflect on previous learning, strengths and weaknesses in these skills, to select one or two priorities to work on and to draw up an appropriate action plan.
- A 'self assessment' sheet was to be completed and sent in with the assignment. It asked students to reflect on the work they had done, to share their priorities with the tutor and the extent to which they felt their goals had been achieved.
- A 'reflection' sheet invited students to study their tutor's feedback and use it alongside their own judgements, the skills audit and the next assignment task in order to review experience and priorities, set new goals and decide how best to achieve them.

- A 'tips' sheet advised what to do when the assignment was returned, to help students 'return to the experience', 'attend to feelings' and move on, making active use of the feedback.
- 'skills sheets' with advice on developing reading, listening, writing, speaking and vocabulary extension skills, referenced to the *LLGSG*, were available for those who needed them.

The tasks were to be repeated for each assignment. In this way students were encouraged to engage in 'reflective observation' on their language learning and performance, i.e. their 'concrete experience'. They were then to move into 'abstract conceptualisation' formulating new priorities and action plans ready for 'active experimentation' and further 'concrete experience' in the next assignment. Apart from the skills sheets, all materials were bilingual.

Research into language learner self-direction and autonomy emphasises the importance of self-assessment¹ so that learners become aware of their progress and focus their learning (for example, Boud, 1995; Cotterall, 1995; Harris 1997). Researchers also point out that learners may lack experience and confidence in this activity (Horowitz, 1989; Candy, 1991; Gibbs, 1995; Hanson 1996; Broady, 1999; Rust, 2002). The project materials introduce learners to self-assessment and give an opportunity to gain experience.

Many become used to equating language learning with mastery of grammar and vocabulary. The 'skills audit' aims to broaden that view and raise awareness of skills and other features of written or oral performance. Candy (1991: 281) points out that many learners may have a restricted repertoire of learning strategies or techniques. The 'skills' sheets introduce learners to other possibilities. Candy also notes that learners may have a range of strategies available, but lack the competence or confidence to decide which to use for a particular purpose. The intention of the project materials is to raise awareness of the possibilities and encourage learners to try out

¹ In this research, self-assessment is used to describe assessment of one's performance either against set task criteria or against another personal target such as native speaker level performance. Self-evaluation is used to describe reviewing and judging changes in one's performance over time.

suggested strategies. However, as researchers suggest, awareness does not automatically lead to appropriate implementation (Candy, 1991: 281; Chamot, 1993: 318; Ridley, 1997: 68; Cotterall, 1999: 510).

Changes were made to the format and content of the project materials after the initial study. These were based on feedback from students and tutors and took account of changes to the assessment strategy made by the Department of Languages as well as the introduction of a Level 1 Spanish course. At a debriefing meeting, tutors exchanged ideas and experience. They identified approaches which had worked well and devised target language activities with a focus on language learning strategies. The outcomes of these discussions were incorporated into a set of guidelines for tutors.

Early in 1999, a meeting was held for all tutors who were interested in using the project materials with their students during that academic year. 17 tutors decided to use them. (See Appendix 8.) This meeting was an introduction for new participants but enabled continuing participants to clarify their understanding of the rationale, discuss their approach for the new year and provide first hand information and experience to the new participants. Both groups examined the guidelines to see if they were workable. They suggested some revisions and a checklist to help tutors keep track of the distribution and receipt of project materials. The guidelines were advisory. Tutors could work with the project materials in whichever ways they felt were appropriate to their tutorial group.

Student Questionnaire

Appendix 9 is a copy of the questionnaire. A main purpose was to identify students who were willing to participate in interviews. In addition, the questionnaire was designed to:

- establish which of the respondents had used the project materials or not. Those who had not were asked to give reasons. Norton and Crowley's study (1995) suggested a significantly higher surface approach among students who did not take advantage of an opportunity to enhance their learning. However, research reviewed also indicates that the pressure of

work and style of assessment, as well as students preferred approach to learning may be more significant. This item allowed a sample of non-users to be selected for interview.

- establish the extent to which students used the project materials and how much time they had spent on this. This information was used in order to select interviewees who had used all or various combinations of the materials. The initial study showed that time was a major worry and the survey at the end of that study had included a similar question, but with an open-ended reply option which few completed. The 1999 questionnaire included quantified response options to encourage a greater number of replies.
- gather some information on the priorities which students had identified, whether or not they had used the materials, how they had worked on those priorities and how they used their tutor's feedback. It was felt that this information would provide a background for comparison with the in-depth interviews as well as providing a starting point for these interviews. It did not invite students to select skills and strategies from a pre-determined list. Benson and Lor (1999: 460) warn that this risks 'leading' responses. However, this means that students may not respond at all or only briefly.
- establish learners' overall reactions to the materials. This would enable selection of students with negative as well as positive reactions for interview.
- collect information about the nature and extent of the student's previous language learning experience and qualifications. This information is not collected routinely by the University, although data is gathered on general levels of educational attainment. Research reviewed indicates the importance of previous experience and expectations on willingness to engage in reflection. Some studies suggest that level of language learning may affect strategy use, with more advanced learners using a greater variety. Although this was not a focus of the research, it was felt that collection of such information kept options open.

Student Interview Schedules

The interview schedules are shown in Appendix 10.

Students were encouraged to speak about each aspect. The prompts were used to assist students to expand their responses if necessary. Once discussion of priority areas and strategies to develop them had been completed, students were asked how they approached the other skills. Users were asked to talk about their experience of using the project materials while non-users were asked to expand on their reasons for not using them. It was anticipated that student responses would provide evidence of

- the strategies which they used to develop their language skills;
- their awareness of alternatives;
- the extent to which they took an 'active' approach and made decisions about their own learning;
- their degree of 'self-awareness' about their learning;
- whether they tended to a deep or surface approach to learning.

This evidence could then be compared between users and non-users. The perceived value of the project materials was also explored with users.

Tutor Interview Schedules

The interview schedule is shown in Appendix 11. Tutors were encouraged to speak about each of these areas. The interviews aimed to explore the tutor's attitude to the project materials and whether they felt any further revisions were required. The literature review highlights the fundamental importance of the tutor's commitment to encouraging students to adopt a reflective, self-directed approach. It was envisaged that tutors' responses would provide evidence of their understanding of, and commitment to, the principles involved as well as evidence of reflection on their approach to tutoring.

METHODS OF DATA ANALYSIS

Questionnaires

Questionnaires were initially sorted according to whether they were from users or non-users of the project materials and further sorted by language. Responses were collated for each question. Proportions were calculated for responses to closed questions. Responses to open questions or further comments were categorised by key themes, skills or strategies.

Interviews

Transcriptions were made by a third party with experience of transcribing research interviews. This had the advantage of freeing up time for the researcher and providing an un-interpreted version of the contents of each interview as a basis for analysis. In the initial study, notes, rather than transcriptions, were made from the recordings by the researcher. This meant that analysis and interpretation began at this stage. It ‘mediated’ the responses and potentially weakened the voices of the students and tutors whose perspectives were being explored. The approach adopted in the main study had two disadvantages. The researcher did not have the opportunity to become familiar with the content of the interviews while transcribing. The transcriber was not familiar with all the languages involved and therefore could not always understand sections where the interviewee referred to specific examples in the target language.

Green *et al.* (1997: 172) argue that it is impossible

“to write talk down in an objective way”.

They maintain that a transcript is a text that “re”-presents an event and is not the event itself. What is re-presented is data constructed by a researcher for a particular purpose. They point out the decisions that are made in order to transcribe interactions, particularly where groups are involved, and emphasise the importance of conveying context and non-verbal communication. In this research, interviews were conducted by telephone, involved only two people and were transcribed by a third party. However,

the intonation and stress patterns which would convey some of the information, particularly in the absence of non-verbal communication, are missing. It would have been possible to listen to each transcript and add these patterns, however I felt that the likely information gain did not warrant the time involved. Respondents appeared to indicate their strength of feeling clearly on different matters through their choice of vocabulary.

Transcriptions were loaded into the NUD*IST programme (QSR, 1997) in three files: student users, student non-users and tutors. A number of categories were set up as 'Free Nodes' for each file. These categories reflected areas discussed in the interviews. Sections of the transcripts were saved under each category. (See Appendix 12) The transcript collations were then explored in a number of ways as described below.

Analysis of User Interviews

The language learning strategies and techniques described by students were identified and classified. Table 3.1 compares the strategy classifications proposed by Oxford (1990: 18-21) and O'Malley and Chamot (1990: 119:120). The classification by Oxford has been used in this research as it is more detailed, and gives greater weight to strategies used in oral performance, social and affective strategies. Appendix 7 summarises individual student strategy use. Reference was also made to the list of 'active' techniques used by adult language learners reported in the study by Naiman *et al.* (1996, 2nd edn.: 33-37).

Table 3.1 Classification of language learning strategies by Oxford (1990: 18-21) and O'Malley and Chamot (1990: 119:120).

Metacognitive strategies	
Oxford	O'Malley and Chamot
Overviewing and linking with already known material	Advance organisers, including previewing the main ideas and concepts involved.
Paying attention	Directed attention, attending in general to a learning task.
Delaying speech production to focus on listening	
Finding out about language learning	Self-management, understanding the conditions that help one learn
Organising resources and activity	and arranging for the presence of these conditions
Setting goals and objectives	
Identifying the purpose of a language task (purposeful listening/reading/speaking/writing)	Selective attention, deciding which specific aspects of input to attend to.
Planning for a language task	Functional planning, planning for and rehearsing linguistic components necessary for a task.
Seeking practice opportunities	
Self-monitoring	Self-monitoring
Self-evaluation	Self-evaluation
Cognitive strategies	
Repeating	Repetition, including overt practice and silent rehearsal.
Formally practising sounds and writing systems	
Recognising and using formulas and patterns	
Recombining	Recombination, constructing sentence or longer sequence by combining known elements in a new way.
Practising naturalistically	
Getting the idea quickly	
Using resources for receiving and sending messages	Resourcing, using target language reference materials.
Reasoning deductively	Applying or deducing language rules
Analysing expressions	
Analysing contrastively (across languages)	
Translating	Translation, using the first language as a base for

	understanding/producing the second language.
Transferring	Transfer, using previous linguistic knowledge or prior skills to assist comprehension or production
Taking notes	Note taking
Summarising	Summarising
Highlighting	
Compensation strategies (included under cognitive strategies by O'Malley and Chamot)	
Guessing intelligently, using linguistic and other clues	Inferencing, using available information to guess meanings of new items, predict outcomes or filling missing information.
Overcoming limitations in speaking and writing by: switching to mother tongue, getting help, using mime or gesture, avoiding communication, selecting the topic, adjusting the message, coining words, using a circumlocution.	
Memory strategies (included under cognitive strategies by O'Malley and Chamot)	
Grouping	Grouping
Associating/elaborating	Elaboration, relating new information to prior knowledge or making meaningful personal associations with the new information.
Placing new words into context.	
Using imagery	Imagery
Semantic mapping, using mind maps etc.	
Using key words.	Keyword method.
Representing sounds in memory	Auditory representation, keeping the sound of a word, phrase or longer language sequence in mind.
Structured reviewing of material/items to be remembered.	
Using physical response or sensation	
Using mechanical techniques, such as pinning up words and phrases around the house.	
Social strategies	
Asking for clarification or verification	Question for clarification
Asking for correction	
Co-operating with peers	Co-operation: working together with one or more peers to solve a problem, pool information or get feedback.

Co-operation with proficient users of the new language.	
Developing cultural understanding and empathy	
Becoming aware of others thoughts and feelings, both peers and other language users.	
Affective Strategies	
Lowering your anxiety, e.g. through relaxation techniques, music, laughter.	
Encouraging yourself, e.g. by making positive statements, rewarding yourself, taking risks wisely.	
Taking your emotional temperature, e.g. by writing a language learning diary, discussing feelings with someone else, using a checklist, listening to your body.	











Actions by which a student took control of pedagogical and functional activity during their study (Rowse and Libben, 1994) or activated their language beyond coursework and created their own learning tasks (Nunan: 1996) were noted. Student responses were examined for evidence of reflection and decision-making, awareness of alternative strategies and self-awareness. From these explorations it was possible to draw some conclusions about the students' approaches to learning and the extent to which they demonstrated the characteristics of the 'good' language learner and a capacity for autonomy. McCune and Entwistle's elements of the deep approach (2000: 4), the characteristics of the 'good' language learner identified by Naiman *et al.* (1996, 2nd edn.: 30-33) and Nunan's ways of enhancing autonomy (1996: 20) are compared in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2 A comparison of the ‘good’ language learner, the ‘deep’ approach to learning and ways of enhancing language learner autonomy.

The ‘good’ language learner (Naiman <i>et al.</i> , 1996, 2 nd edn.: 30-33)	Elements of the deep approach (McCune and Entwistle, 2000: 4)	Enhancing autonomy in language learning (Nunan, 1996: 20)
Develop and exploit language as a means of communication and interaction	Intention to understand	Activate language to communicate outside ‘classroom’
Actively involved in the learning task	Active interest and personal engagement	Active involvement in producing target language
	Relating ideas	
Develop and exploit language as a system	Gaining an overview	
	Creating outlines and structures	Select content and learning tasks
Constantly monitor performance and revise their understanding of the second language system	Questioning and using evidence critically	Self-monitor and self-assess
	Seeking the main point	
	Drawing conclusions	Evaluate own progress
	Seeing the purpose of a task or seeing it in its wider context	
Manage the affective demands of language learning		

Student descriptions of activity were also examined using Biggs’ hierarchy of generic activities (2001: 89) representing surface and deep level approaches shown in Table 3.3.

Table: 3.3 Approaches to Learning and the cognitive level of learning activities. A hierarchy of generic activities expressed as verbs (Biggs, 2001: 89).

COGNITIVE LEVEL	APPROACHES		TEACHING
	deep	surface	
as verbs <i>Intentions:</i>	to understand	to get by	the challenge:
reflect			
apply: far problems			
hypothesise		<i>higher level activities missing</i>	<i>teach to support missing activities</i>
relate to principle			
apply: near problems			
explain			
argue			
relate			
comprehend: main ideas			
describe			
enumerate			
paraphrase			<i>eliminate what supports lower verbs</i>
comprehend sentence			
identify, name			
memorise			

In view of the significance attached to affective factors by researchers (Boud *et al.*, 1985; Oxford, 1990; White, 1997, 1999a,b), particular attention was paid to the feelings demonstrated by students in relation to the project materials, the course materials, assessment, learning strategies, their own performance and the context of the distance learner.

Analysis of non-user interviews

Non-user transcripts were examined in the same way, but exploration of the use and impact of the project materials was replaced by examination of reasons for not using them.

Analysis of tutor interviews

The relationship between tutors and students was explored together with tutors’ perceptions of the impact of the project materials on this relationship and other aspects of student learning. The literature review highlights the

importance of tutor expectations and the impact of possible disjunction between espoused theory and actual practice. The transcripts were examined for evidence of tutors' expectations and view of student learning. They were also examined for evidence of tensions or discrepancies between their behaviour and espoused commitment to critical reflection and self-direction through use of the project materials. Tutor responses were examined for evidence of attitudes supporting self-direction and student choice. For example, description of activities raising awareness of alternative strategies and allowing or promoting decisions by students, or use of verbs such as 'suggest', 'offer', 'discuss' as opposed to 'give', 'tell' or 'get them to'.

The literature review emphasised that tutors may not have experienced a reflective approach to learning and may find change threatening. The transcripts were, therefore, examined for evidence of reflection on, and changes to, practice. The importance of affective and social factors has already been noted. Griffiths and Parr (2000) showed that students believed they used social and affective strategies more frequently than teachers thought they did. Interview transcripts were examined for evidence of awareness among tutors of the importance of these strategies and the impact of student feelings on their study.

Examination of OU language course materials and assignments

The literature review indicated the influence of task design and assessment on students' approaches to learning and a sample of material from the language courses available in 1999 (see Appendix 3) was reviewed. The sample consisted of the course guide, the first, second, penultimate and final month's work from each course (from a total of eight) and the assessment books for the course for that year. The *LLGSG* was also reviewed. Brockbank and McGill (1998: 107) highlight the importance of allowing students time to reflect. They quote Dearing's view (1997, paragraph 8.6, p.116) that supporting learning is just as important a part of a learning programme as delivering content. The course materials were examined for the extent of encouragement and opportunity to make choices about activities, to experiment with strategies and make decisions about their

study. They were also examined for opportunities, encouragement and guidance for reflection and decision-making about learning and strategies, as well as support for, and opportunities to practice, self-assessment and evaluation.

Biggs' hierarchy of generic activities representing surface and deep approaches was used to examine assignment tasks (Table 3.3). Assignment guidance notes were examined for advice on how to complete the tasks, what to include and the language structures to be used. The *LLGSG* was examined for the extent of encouragement to reflect on approaches to learning or performance and the presentation of strategies to develop specific skills.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings are presented and discussed here in relation to the research questions. Appendices 6 and 8 give information about the students and tutors interviewed. Appendix 7 shows the level of individual strategy use. Appendices 4 and 5 give information about assignments. ‘Users’ refers to those who used the project materials and ‘non-users’ to those who did not.

1. What do OU language learners actually do?

Students were encouraged to speak about the ways in which they developed their productive and receptive language skills and the ways in which they developed their range of expression and command of grammatical structures.

Speaking Skills

Apart from doing the speaking activities in the course, students sought or created a wide range of opportunities to speak as shown in Table 4.1. These were more varied and ‘active’ than suggested in the initial study or in the investigation by Schrafnagl and Fage (1998) which only involved Level 1 learners.

Table 4.1 Activities to develop speaking skills

Activities	Users	Non-users
Spoke to friends/other native speakers	5	8
Spoke to other members of family	3	0
Spoke the language at work	3	2
Taught it to others	1	0
Visited the country	2	4
Joined a class, language club or took private tuition	4	2

Contact with other students	4	1
Tutorials important for speaking skills development	3	2
Talked to self/taped and listened to self	3	4
Read along with audio and video tapes	5	1
Repetition/ Pinned useful phrases around the house	4	3
Reading aloud	1	3
Little or no additional activity	0	4
Total commenting on speaking skills development	16	15

Students were using social strategies, co-operating with peers or with more proficient users of the language, in order to improve their skills. They were conscious of the lack of opportunity for spontaneous talk in a distance learning course. L140E even advertised in the local paper for native speaker conversation partners as

“the course didn’t offer any speaking like this at all”.

Student comments indicated that such communication was also used in metacognitive strategies of self-monitoring and self-evaluation, noting how well they got their message across, or understood their interlocuteur. As an affective strategy, encouraging yourself, it was a source of tremendous motivation and satisfaction when communication was successful.

“Yes! I can manage this! [...] I get an enormous amount of pleasure from it” (L221C).

“I was very encouraged because practically everybody understood what I said to them” (L140B).

Students indicated that these contacts were also used in cognitive strategies, allowing naturalistic practice, recombining of items learned and an opportunity for ‘noticing’ how others say things, inferring meaning and making comparisons between languages. Students also referred to additional activities involving cognitive or memory strategies which did not involve contact with others, as shown in the lower part of Table 4.1.

This variety of activity and enthusiasm for the language was in marked contrast to comments about the oral assignments. (21 students specifically commented on these: 12 users and 9 non-users). Students contrasted their ability when communicating in the above situations with their anxieties when faced with the task of recording themselves speaking on tape, including all the required content points in accurate language within a set time.

"I was just so worried about making a fool of myself. I realise that my difficulties were caused by anxiety and inability to relax, but I couldn't help that in the context of the assessment. In France I don't find it too difficult to communicate because in that context, I'm focusing on the message...." (L221A).

Students were particularly concerned about the amount of content which they were expected to include within the prescribed time, even those who described themselves as confident in oral communication. Concentrating on listing points and on grammatical accuracy meant they were unable to replicate the 'normal' behaviour they used when speaking to others.

"That was something I found incredibly difficult not to write out [...] even though my conversation abilities were reasonably strong ... to actually cram it into the time, that was the problem" (L221C).

"I never found the key points were good enough because you had to have the grammar right" (L213A).

Students had difficulty attending to both fluency and accuracy at the same time as anticipated by Foster and Skehan (1999) and Van Patten (1990, 1996, in Ellis, 2001a). There were also concerns about stumbling or hesitating because of the time limit.

"The more you sort of stumble and stop and think of things, the fewer points you can actually get in" (L230B).

For these reasons, 7 users and 7 non-users admitted speaking from or reading from carefully prepared scripts or rehearsing so often that they knew

it off by heart. Students were marked down for inappropriate intonation when reading a script, so they also talked about perfecting the art of 'reading' in the style of spontaneous speech.

Students used a mixture of cognitive and metacognitive strategies to prepare their oral assignments. They reviewed the material and the question to discover exactly what was required. They highlighted and extracted relevant points, planned and structured the content. Despite adopting these apparently appropriate strategies, they nevertheless went on to prepare a far more detailed script rather than speaking from notes. Only one student said that he had decided not to worry about all the points to be included, but to prioritise spontaneity.

"I mean you're learning the language to be able to talk to people [...] obviously you don't talk to people from notes" (L230C).

Students were aware of the discrepancy between the strategies they deployed to improve their oral skills and their approach to the assignments.

"It's that funny sort of split between my personality of being at ease with German people and off the top of the head [...] and the tutors demanding sort of accuracy" (L230A).

Some found the tasks restrictive as they appeared to give little room for the personal opinion also required.

"I found the TMAs a little bit restrictive in that a lot of it was regurgitating what was in the material and it was only the last sentence ... you felt ... I can go free on this" (L130B).

L221F was particularly frustrated by the style of the assignment tasks, the need to "lift" points from the stimulus materials and the apparent lack of relationship to the course work.

"Each TMA was really entirely self-contained .. but [...] in order to do this assignment successfully, you did have

to actually take large chunks out of both the written and the cassette bits, which was not obvious from the instructions [...] they obviously weren't looking for anything we'd been doing in the course".

Students suggested reducing the number of required content points rather than extending the time limit. They noted the need for more practice in developing the skill of speaking from notes.

Two users and three non-users mentioned having experience of making presentations in their own language and how these skills may or may not have helped them.

"If I do any speech I tend to take notes and have key words so on the whole I could do that reasonably well in German" (L230E).

L221D explained that he would have written a presentation out in full, not in order to read it, but as an aide memoire. He reverted to this practice after trying to speak from notes because of worries about accuracy.

"I was so embarrassed at the results and really I wanted to be able to put something across that I felt reasonably reflected my ability".

L210A regularly made public presentations using a full script and she felt many public figures did too.

"I do think it's necessary to be precise and lucid and get your facts across without boring people to death with stuttering".

She had been praised for her intonation, having perfected the art of reading aloud. For L213C, time constraints meant previous practice was abandoned.

"I am a public speaker and I wouldn't dream of reading material ... but within this context, I could not meet the goalposts without doing so".

Students suggested these skills could be developed within the tutorials and at the residential schools, or through more guided practice in the course materials. Although these contain regular invitations to speak on a topic for a given period of time with varying degrees of guidance on what to cover, students clearly did not feel that this offered the sort of development and practice they needed.

Both users and non-users deployed similar social, affective, metacognitive and cognitive strategies to develop their speaking skills and had similar concerns about the assignment tasks. However there were some differences. Although most engaged in 'active' strategies to improve their speaking skills, four non-users (L213C, L213D, L221E, L221F) did little beyond the course work and did not complete a lot of the speaking activities in the course. Other non-users indicated difficulties.

"I wanted to talk more, but there didn't seem to be any other OU French students nearby" L210E.

This student had joined a local class but been very dissatisfied. L140D also had trouble finding others to speak to. L213C worked with a local native speaker, but this involved translating *The Hobbit* into German rather than conversation.

Confidence emerged as a stronger theme with non-users. Although two students mentioned the way their confidence was boosted by speaking to and being understood by native speakers (L210C and L210D) three others mentioned how they felt happier to speak the language when they knew the other person's English wasn't very good (L213D, L221E and L210C). Another (L210E) touched on the issue of speaking the target language to other English native speakers in tutorials or at residential school.

"you know you feel odd when you're speaking another language to a compatriot [...] if you both feel that your French isn't that hot [...] it restricts your conversation" (L210E).

L221F found her experience of the course very negative in this respect.

"I feel I've lost my confidence in doing it".

The majority of both users and non-users deployed 'active' strategies to develop their speaking skills. They used the target language for meaningful communication beyond the course fulfilling two of Nunan's (1996: 20) conditions for enhancing autonomy. They took functional control by creating forms of meaningful interaction (Rowell and Libben 1994). They used contact with other speakers of the language as a metacognitive strategy, assessing their own progress, and as an affective strategy to boost confidence and maintain motivation. Their focus on meaning in these interactions demonstrated many elements of a deep approach (McCune and Entwistle, 2000: 4). Affective factors appeared stronger for non-users and their lack of confidence in some cases may have reduced their readiness to take any opportunity to speak the language and ultimately their motivation. Yang (1999: 529) notes that lack of confidence in ability leads to less functional practice. Ramsden, (1992: 58) and Marton and Saljö (1997, 2nd edn.: 49) have suggested that a focus on meaning, or a deep approach, makes study more interesting and satisfying, therefore students engage in more activity, see more evidence of progress and are motivated to do more.

The assignment tasks, on the other hand, evoked a form-focused response. They destroyed spontaneity and appeared to force students into adopting a surface approach through the volume of content required within the time limit, anxieties about the mode of assessment and the need for accuracy, and the lack of scope for their own contribution. These are conditions identified by Biggs (1988) and Ramsden (1997) as promoting a surface approach. Students described the tasks using verbs listed in the lower, 'surface' half of Biggs' hierarchy (2001:89). Most students, therefore, adopted a surface approach to achieve a high score, despite otherwise displaying elements of a deep approach. This tension appeared to have reduced satisfaction levels and increased frustration and resentment for some students as anticipated by Ramsden (1992: 58).

Listening Skills

Students used both the course materials and other resources to develop their listening skills via extensive listening as shown in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2 Ways of developing listening skills

Activities	Users	Non-users
Listening to radio	6	6
Watching satellite TV	2	5
Listening to other material (tapes/songs)	2	4
Extensive listening to course audio	4	1
Extensive viewing of course video	1	0
Total commenting on developing listening skills	14	11

News bulletins were popular.

“One advantage[....], you know, it’s every half an hour, is that quite a lot of it’s the same, so you hear it once and you might get it or half get it ... and then the next time you’ve got more idea of what it’s about. [....] quite a lot of it is familiar anyway” (L230B).

Interviews, discussion programmes and phone-ins were also mentioned, either for their interest and relevance to topics in the course, or for the chance to hear ‘real’ people.

“I listen to absolute rubbish [talking about phone-in programmes] because I mean when you go to France, they can’t speak in BBC French, for want of a better word.” (L221C).

L213A thought this type of programme was easier to understand than films, but that church services were even better!

“ ... the vicar or whoever [....] speaks slowly and clearly and very concisely and I found [....] that very good

because it was very clearly pronounced ... not gabbled"
(L213A).

Some students of Spanish (L140B and L140C) found it difficult to access radio or TV.

Extensive listening involves a focus on meaning. Several spoke of the value of simply getting tuned in and their efforts to listen to as much of the target language as they could.

"I try to listen to Spanish an hour a day ... I try to saturate myself" (L140E).

Course materials were also used in this way. Listening to the cassettes in the car or while working in the kitchen was mentioned by four users, another liked to watch course videos. As with speaking skills, students appeared to use extensive listening in a number of metacognitive strategies. They actively sought practice opportunities to increase their speed of understanding and found it useful for monitoring their understanding and evaluating their progress.

"I think it was [...] getting used in your brain to processing stuff at speed [...] and recognising words and particularly verbs" (L120A).

"I got better at understanding definitely as time went on"
(L120B).

L213A talked about how motivating it was to find out how much he could understand and to recognise words or structures he had learnt.

The affective strategy of encouraging yourself can be seen here.

"The German TV stations [...] are quite difficult to understand [...] but you feel very pleased when you understand some of it" (L230D).

Students increased their motivation through the added interest and relevance of what they heard as well as having an opportunity to assess their progress in extracting meaning. They also 'noticed' new words or expressions. Two

students mentioned using the cognitive strategies of taking notes and using a dictionary to check meanings. L230B tried to jot down

“if there’s a phrase I really like”.

L210A said she usually had a dictionary handy

“and I just jot down a word if it recurs and I’m not sure what it means”.

The rest simply concentrated on the overall meaning and listened as they would in their own language. L210D sums up the impact extensive listening can have.

“I remember when I first started and I was thinking, I’m not really sure what they’re talking about but over a period of time and without realising [...] it suddenly hit me ... I’m really listening to this and I understand what’s going on [...] I got quite a buzz from that”.

When listening to material supplied for course activities and assignments, students continued to listen for the gist and to get an overview before moving into purposeful listening to identify the key points required for the task. However, particularly for assignments, it became apparent that this often meant listening for all the details rather than being selective. Cognitive strategies then became more important. Table 4.3 shows the strategies used when listening for course activities and assignments.

Table 4.3 Strategies used for course listening activities and assignments

Strategies	Users	Non-users
Overviewing/anticipating from context/getting the gist	10	8
Recognising formulas and patterns/transcribing	3	4
Using resources (dictionary)	6	5
Difficulties checking unknown words	4	4
Using resources (transcript)	3	9
Guessing intelligently	4	4
Taking notes/key words	8	6
Total commenting on listening for assignments	14	14

When talking about course activities, non-users appeared to resort more readily to transcripts to fill in missing points as well as to check their understanding.

"I liked having the transcript as well [...] that was helpful for the bits you don't understand" (L120D).

"With the video [...] a lot of it I found impossible without the transcript" (L221F).

Some used it as a short-cut, to save time listening and working things out (L210E, L213D). Eight students specifically said they were happy to guess from context, though they might double check with a dictionary if doing an assignment.

"For the assignments ... I tended to look a lot up because I wanted to know exactly what they were talking about ... for the general exercises [...] I was just going for general meaning" (L120D).

Eleven students mentioned using a dictionary. For some there was no question of relying on intelligent guessing.

"I'm a compulsive looker-upper" (L130C).

Table 4.3 shows that a quarter of the sample found it difficult to look up words from assignment materials.

"The pronunciation was so different from the spelling"
(L140B).

'Taking notes' is an important cognitive strategy in this context, particularly for assignments. Students tended to use the target language, though might use English occasionally.

"It's easier because then you can do it while you are listening. If you translate, you have to stop. Usually you're writing in Spanish, so you've got to translate it back again anyway" (L140A).

Students were concerned about remembering all the points they would need for the task and about getting enough of the details. This led to three users and four non-users almost transcribing the entire cassette, despite some indicating that they otherwise had good levels of comprehension. L221C expressed this fear of forgetting key points.

"yes.. age you know [...] the memory's nowhere near as good as it could be".

For L221F it was due to her lack of comprehension

"because I found those tapes so difficult I actually transcribed them".

The reliance on transcripts and the difficulties in understanding and identifying words and phrases mentioned by both groups of students perhaps indicate a need for more course activities relating the spoken and written word. Some courses (L210, L230) suggested transcription and comparison with the published transcript as a way of developing such links, but only one student (L210E) used transcription as a practice strategy rather than a means to getting information for assignments.

"what I frequently did, and I think that's what's helped me with my ear ... was that I made my own transcript [...]"

and then track, you know whether my transcript matched ...” (L210E).

This seems to exemplify the point made by a number of researchers (Candy, 1991; Chamot, 1993; Matsumoto, 1996; Ridley, 1997; Cohen, 1998) that simply raising awareness of or presenting strategies is not enough. Students may not take them up unless they are part of the course and they have opportunities to try them. Learners generally regard listening comprehension as the most difficult language skill (McDonough, 1999: 8). Difficulties in listening and understanding can seriously inhibit progress and reduce satisfaction and motivation levels. Students need to be encouraged to identify and confront such problems and to choose appropriate strategies to overcome them. Similarly, although students receive advice on ‘purposeful listening’, (e.g. *LLGSG*, p.22), or in the course materials (Level 2 courses) activities with a stronger focus on extensive listening, note-taking and extraction of key points could be useful from Level 1 onwards.

A strong theme to emerge in interviews with users (and to a lesser extent with non-users), was what they had learned about developing their listening skills and the self-awareness they demonstrated. There were numerous examples of the metacognitive strategy of finding out about language learning, or ‘metacognitive experiences’ as White (1999b: 38) refers to such moments of realisation. Four students who had begun by trying to transcribe the tapes (L230C, L221B, L221C, L221D) realised that this was not appropriate or worthwhile.

“I’d wasted an awful lot of time [...] trying to write down all sorts of things which were totally irrelevant to the question” (L230C).

L213A had learned to get an overview first, before plunging into the detail.

“One of the things that I felt I had gained very much from the course was that I learned to listen. I changed my technique doing that, because when I first listened to them [assignment cassettes], I used to try to write down the details immediately and then I realised that wasn’t the

thing to do and [...] I would just listen to it a few times until I started to become familiar with it".

However, L230A had realised that her natural inclination was to go with the gist and she had found that she needed to pay more attention to the details because of the nature of the assignment tasks. L120A realised that he would more naturally focus on the gist but had tended to concentrate too much on trying to understand every word for assignments. Several had realised that it was better to take notes in the target language than in English.

"that was just hopeless ... a waste of time ... very long-winded" (L210D).

A sign of growing confidence was the realisation that

"once you have got a reasonable grounding in the language, your guesses are reasonably sort of educated anyway" L221C.

Or that

"eventually you are more relaxed and you realise that you don't have to sit there for hours and hours to get enough to answer the question" (L140A).

Students showed similar awareness when talking about the extensive listening they engaged in. L210A recognised that she responded best to visual stimuli and so used course video rather than audio material and satellite TV rather than radio. L120D also found the combination of sound and visuals very useful. L140A decided it helped to do some extensive listening in order to get back into the language if she hadn't been able to study for a while.

Although less extreme than in the case of speaking skills, there was still a contrast between the focus on meaning when students attempted to develop their listening skills beyond the course and the focus on detail required by the assignments. Once again they described the tasks as demanding behaviour encapsulated by the verbs in the lower, 'surface' half of Biggs' hierarchy. It appears, nevertheless, that students actively engaged in

functional practice activities and used metacognitive strategies to develop their listening skills, seeking a variety of opportunities to engage in meaningful communication and monitor progress. Some students showed awareness of learning how to listen for different purposes.

Reading Skills

Both users and non-users spoke about the ways in which they used other resources for extensive reading. The resources are shown in Table 4.4.

Table 4.4 Resources used for extensive reading

Resources	Users	Non-users
Books/novels	6	9
Newspapers	6	7
Magazines	2	3
Internet material	1	2
Total commenting on resources	12	14

It appears non-users read more than users, however it may be that more of them chose to speak about the development of their reading skills. 9 students indicated that they would have liked to read more, but lack of time prevented this. It is possible that some students were referring to the reading they did outside the course study period as L210E explained,

“ I’ve read quite a lot of books in French [...] there often isn’t time to do it while I’m actually doing the course ”
(L210E).

Students read novels (sometimes translated from the English so already familiar), short stories and magazines for pleasure and read newspapers, magazines or material on the internet for information relevant to course topics as well as for interest. This reflects the technique expressed by learners in the study by Naiman *et al.* (1996, 2nd edn.), ‘reading familiar, interesting, eye-catching or bilingual material whenever possible’. Reading for pleasure was a way in which some students encouraged themselves. The

pleasure increased their motivation and reinforced their desire to become a member of the community of speakers/readers of their target language. L221C expresses this kind of enthusiasm about a translation of *Rebecca*

“the first couple of chapters in French, they are so incredibly romantic and beautiful, it’s absolutely lovely”.

Another student commented

“I no longer read anything in English, apart from in the workplace [...] if I want to read something, I’ll try and get it in French text rather than English” (L210D).

At the same time, reading for interest and pleasure allows students to monitor their comprehension and progress

“I read .. a translation of Alastair McClean things like that with a good plot [...] before, I would have used the dictionary and spent about six months getting through the first chapter .. now I read the book in about two evenings” (L130A).

Talking about reading *Le Monde*, L120B expresses this even more clearly

“ it was for interest and it was a test of my own ability as well [...] I just thought it would be interesting to see if I can read a French newspaper, or read an article written in a different way and understand it”.

When reading material for pleasure or interest, students focused on the meaning and tried to avoid looking up words in favour of guessing from context. They mainly used this material in metacognitive or affective strategies as explained above. However, six students (L230D, L140E, L210D, L221F, L210C, L213C) specifically mentioned cognitive strategies, highlighting and looking up key words to develop their vocabulary,

“some words you think, oh, that’s a nice word .. and you can use it yourself, then I probably would [look it up]” (L210D).

L221F, L210C and L213C noted how the number of words they needed to look up decreased as they became more familiar with a particular author or topic.

When talking about reading course and assignment texts the majority again mentioned metacognitive strategies. 13 of the 19 students who talked about the way they approached such texts indicated that they would overview the material first in order to get the gist of the text. 2 students also particularly referred to using the title or other clues to predict what the text was about (L130B, L140A). Students then engaged in purposeful reading and deployed cognitive strategies to identify the detail required to complete the assignment task, highlighting, taking notes and using the dictionary to check unknown words. The main difference from their approach to reading other material was in the increased use of these cognitive strategies, particularly use of the dictionary. 15 out of the 19 students said that they would be looking up words they were not familiar with. For some, this was a compulsion though they realised the need to avoid constantly rushing to the dictionary.

"I find it very frustrating if I don't know words [...] I have to sort of stop myself from looking it up" (L230B).

Others like L130B, L130C, L210C and L140A limited themselves to checking the key words. Two students (L213C, L130B) were concerned that they might get things wrong if they guessed

"if you actually guess wrong, you start off having put in your mind a false association .. and clearing that false association out is not easy" (L213C).

Nevertheless, students were more willing to make inferences when reading assignment texts than they were when coping with the assignment listening material. This is presumably because the level of anxiety is not so great. They have the written text to refer to and know the spelling of any words they choose to look up, therefore will be able to find them in the dictionary. They can work at their own pace which may bring its own problems as a 'compulsive checker' acknowledged,

“that’s why I spend far too long doing it” (L210F).

There appeared to be a greater focus on meaning when reading for assignment tasks than was evident when students were using listening material for assignments, although they were still identifying specific information for the task. As for listening tasks, students tended to take notes in the target language rather than in English, having realised that translation was a waste of time. A written text lent itself to greater use of the cognitive strategies of highlighting and underlining rather than note-taking.

Overall, it appears that both groups of students took an ‘active’ approach, deploying metacognitive and affective strategies to developing their reading skills as far as time constraints allowed. They gained considerable enjoyment and satisfaction from reading material beyond that provided by the course. They took control of functional activities by creating meaningful interaction and context for their language learning through their use of these resources, demonstrating characteristics of the ‘good’ language learner and elements of the deep approach to learning. The difference between approaches to other resources and reading course and assignment texts was not as pronounced as for speaking and listening skills. However, students again described assignment tasks using verbs in the lower or ‘surface’ half of Bigg’s hierarchy.

Writing skills

Both users and non-users described working on their writing skills almost entirely in terms of the written assignments. Throughout each course there are regular invitations to write pieces of continuous prose of varying lengths, from 50-500 words, depending on the level. Although students worked their way through many other course activities, few took up this invitation as can be seen from Table 4.5. Moreover, in stark contrast to their efforts to develop the previous skills, with one exception, students undertook no writing activity beyond the course. Yang (1999: 528) also found very low levels of written functional practice activities.

Table 4.5 Ways of developing writing skills

Activities	Users	Non-users
Writing for assignments	12	14
Prose writing course exercises	3	4
Practising the writing system	1	0
Other writing practice	0	1
Total commenting on writing skills	12	14

The apparent reluctance to engage in writing continuous prose may be explained by students’ motivation for studying a language. When asked what learning a language meant to them, users overwhelmingly talked about their desire to communicate and learn more about the culture expressed through that language as shown in Table 4.6. This was closely linked with a desire to be able to communicate about their interests on a similar intellectual level to their first language. Students showed strong motivation to join the “community” of target language users.

“My great interest is in philosophy [....] in Wittgenstein [....] I would like to communicate with people about these ideas” (L230C).

“I mean, the people we are with, they are discussing sort of philosophy and religion and all kinds of things [....] they don’t keep it simple” (L230A).

Table 4.6 Motivations for language learning

Motivations	Users	Non-users
Communicating with native speakers	11	9
Learning about the culture	5	4
Reading the language	3	3
Using the language accurately; improving grammar	1	4

Intellectual exercise	0	3
A means to a qualification/career change	0	3
Total commenting on motivation	14	15

Non-users were somewhat more concerned with improving their use of language at word/sentence level. Three talked about their language learning as an intellectual exercise.

“A mental activity that I hope will keep my brain cells ticking over in a way that they might not otherwise do .. since I left work” (L221D).

Three were learning a language they needed for work or a career change. In view of the motivations of these non-users it is perhaps strange that they did not adopt a more ‘active’ approach to the development of their writing skills.

There appeared to be a number of other reasons why neither group engaged in ‘extensive writing’ beyond that required for assignments. In part, it was due to time pressure.

“if time was very short I’m afraid that was always one of the first things to go” (L230B).

However there were other concerns. Some students found it impossible to produce anything like the ‘model’ provided.

“The standards appeared to be so very high [...] you would get the feeling that you weren’t actually coming up to the standard required” (L210F).

Others felt they needed individual feedback,

“I tried a few of the writing exercises, but without the feedback, you know you begin to wonder if you’re just compounding mistakes” (L221E).

L221D had to force himself to do the written activities for this reason and L210C found the lack of individual feedback very de-motivating. These

comments (all from non-users) indicate a need for support/development in self-assessment and in making practical use of the model answers.

Even though they did not actually produce a piece of writing, two students tried to work out a response mentally, or orally (L230D, L213D). L130B, L210F and L210D mentioned just reading the models rather than writing anything themselves, although L130B also copied out some of the models

“just to be writing in German [...] remembering where to put the umlauts” (L130B).

This was the only example of the cognitive strategy of formally practising writing systems. L140E wrote short pieces regularly about a variety of topics of interest, including current political developments such as a visit by the Prime Minister to Spain. This was the only example of written functional activity. However she then got native speakers to check her work.

Neither group employed an ‘active’ approach to developing writing skills. They took no functional control (Rowse and Libben, 1994). They did little to activate their language in writing beyond course work (Nunan, 1996) and few completed course activities requiring extended writing. Most of the writing activity was at word or sentence level, or involved copying words or phrases into their own storage systems for reference and future use.

Written assignments, therefore, provided most students with their main opportunity to write continuous prose. Table 4.7 summarises metacognitive and cognitive strategies deployed in producing written assignments. Strategies used when working on the written and aural stimulus material have already been discussed.

Table 4.7 Strategies used when writing assignments

Strategies	Users	Non-users
Identifying the purpose of a language task	7	8
Planning for a language task	7	5
Self-monitoring	13	13

Recombining	7	10
Translating	0	1
Transferring	0	2
Total commenting on writing strategies	13	14

Students from both groups examined the purpose of the task in terms of the items that had to be included according to the task brief. Only two students (both users, L210A, L230A) talked of trying to understand the nature of the task itself.

“I would try and visualise what was happening [...] the sort of people I was communicating with” (L210A).

Planning involved finding the best ways of putting together the required information and incorporating appropriate grammatical structures. Students did this by assembling their notes under the points to be included or under headings such as introduction, main body, conclusion (L221B, L230A). They also brainstormed relevant words and phrases (L213A, L140D) or looked for those which they could incorporate from the stimuli (L130B, L210A). However, according to some non-users (L230D, L140E, L210D) there was little scope for planning as

“they tell you what to include” (L140E).

L213B went even further,

“all you could do was assemble the points you thought were relevant and pack them together with a few words in between”.

For some students (L230C, L210E) there were difficulties in knowing what to include and what to leave out.

“I found the planning quite difficult [...] what you should put in and what you shouldn’t” (L210E).

This student attributed her difficulty to her lack of experience in writing essays in English. McDonough notes research by Krapels (1990, in

McDonough, 1999: 6) which suggests that lack of L1 composing competence rather than linguistic competence can hold learners back. Other students (L120C, L140E) were able to transfer such experience,

“that’s what I do in English as well if I’m writing anything” (L120C).

Having assembled the information and planned how to present it, students then used recombining in order to integrate the information, structures and phrases appropriately. L221E explained that difficulty in deciding how to construct the argument led to him writing what he wanted to say in English first. He was very aware of the mismatch between the level of his French and the ideas he wanted to express.

All students were aware of the need to self-monitor or check their written work. In nearly every case this was done at the word and sentence level, checking for grammatical accuracy and spelling. The main difference was in whether students adopted a systematic approach, for example checking verbs, then adjective endings, then spelling etc. (8 users, 3 non-users) or whether they adopted a global approach and attempted to check for everything at once (10 non-users, 3 users). 2 users (L130A, L130B) tried to write as accurately as they could in the first place, checking as they went along. One non-user didn’t check his work at all.

“There was so much work to do that by the time you had written something, the last thing I wanted to do was to go through it and check whether everything’s right” (L213C).

For two users, L221B, L140C, checking also meant using the dictionary or a dictionary of synonyms to find the most appropriate words. Only two students, one user (L221B) and one non-user (L140D), mentioned checking aspects beyond the word/sentence level, for example,

“have I answered the question or have I rambled on too much about what I thought people wanted to hear” (L221B).

Several students expressed dissatisfaction at the lack of opportunities for creativity in the written assignment tasks and the tension between the requirement to include certain information as well as their own opinion.

L210A commented

“when there’s an element of imagination I feel quite happy”.

Only the final long essay on 60 point courses was felt to allow some scope for creativity. Tension was caused by the need to balance the word limit and the required content,

“by the time I had the pros and cons of the argument, I didn’t feel I had sufficient space left for myself” (L221B).

This reflected a similar, though less anxious, situation to that described by students in relation to the speaking tasks. There is generally less pressure when writing as there is time to think

“what word and where it goes” (L230D).

L221D enjoyed ‘crafting’ his essay,

“I really enjoyed that .. I generally do a rough draft to start with and then I try to fit in idioms and nice constructions at appropriate points and polish it up”.

For L221F the nature of the task itself and the apparent lack of relationship to what had been studied caused frustration in written as well as spoken assignments. L221B also

“felt a little bit sad sometimes that the TMAs didn’t actually reflect what the actual workbooks wanted me to get out of it”.

Students in both groups had become aware of what helped in developing their writing skills and had changed their way of working as the course progressed, finding out about language learning through ‘metacognitive experiences’. About halfway through the course L130A decided to use the dictionary only when he was really unsure and to abandon checking as too time consuming and unhelpful for real communication situations. L230A

and L230C discovered the hard way that by taking a long time over the writing tasks and not learning to write more spontaneously, they then had problems in the exams. L213D felt that she would have found the assignments easier if she had done more writing practice during the course. L221D found that was indeed the case and that investing time in writing exercises had paid off. L130B had learned to plan her writing rather than *“working on instinct”*.

L120D had not checked her work to start with, but eventually began to realise which errors she made frequently and started to check for these. L120A realised that it would have been better to check through systematically rather than just

“reading it through to see how it sounds”.

When writing assignments, therefore, with the exception of two users, students' attention was focused on specific points of information and on the word/sentence level. Users were more likely to adopt a systematic approach to self-monitoring. The perceptions of a prescriptive task brief and tight word limit restricted some students' ability to plan and take a more creative approach, to write more of themselves into their essays. The picture is one of constraints producing a surface approach which some students found frustrating, though not to the same extent as in oral assignments. Nevertheless, students had learned more about how to develop their writing skills.

Vocabulary Development

Users and non-users described a wide range of memory, cognitive and metacognitive strategies to remember and extend their vocabulary. Naiman *et al.* (1996, 2nd edn.) also found this aspect of language learning produced the largest number of techniques. Table 4.8 shows the strategies used.

Table 4.8 Strategies for remembering and extending vocabulary

Strategies	Users	Non-users
Grouping	10	8
Associating/elaborating	7	5
Placing new words into context	7	4
Using imagery	3	3
Semantic mapping, using mind maps etc	2	3
Using key words	0	0
Representing sounds in memory	1	1
Structured reviewing of items to be remembered	3	4
Using physical response or sensation	0	1
Using mechanical techniques	5	8
Repeating	0	0
Analysing expressions	0	1
Analysing contrastively (across languages)	1	2
Finding out about language learning	11	11
Seeking practice opportunities	7	3
Self-monitoring	3	5
Self-evaluation	1	0
Total commenting on vocabulary strategies	16	15

The most commonly used memory strategies were grouping, associating and placing new words in context. A few students mentioned other cognitive strategies. The most commonly mentioned metacognitive strategies were finding out about language learning and seeking practice opportunities.

Approaches to grouping varied. Some grouped by topic, function or grammatical structure, others by the section in the course book, some by

alphabetical order. In each case it meant writing the word or phrase and its meaning into a notebook (often with English on one side and the target language on the other) or onto index cards or adding it to a computer file. L140C, L221A and L230A found that their systems proved too elaborate or time consuming.

"I started and I thought well, if I carry on with that and all these other things I'll have to do, I'll never get to the end of the book" (L140C).

Four non-users, L221E, L221F, L213D, L210C and one user, L120A did not write down anything or have any sort of system, but relied on making mental notes. For non-users the mechanical act of writing the words down was an important strategy. L130C, for example, did not group vocabulary in any way

"it's in random order, but at least it's been written down so it's gone through another mental process [....] having written it down, it sticks better".

Users deployed the strategies of association and placing new words in context more frequently. In this connection, they also sought practice opportunities to use their new words in context more often. For example, L221B made a point of using new vocabulary in phone calls with her daughter who was studying French. L213B

"put them into the next TMA as soon as possible".

Relatively few students from either group made use of imagery, semantic mapping, sounds or physical responses and no-one tried the key word method. L140A and L140B tried to associate words with visual images, L140C linked words to the sounds of those she already knew in French. L221A found the shape of the word was important. L140E colour-coded vocabulary and visualised words on the page as did L221D,

"I can visualise where it's written on the sheet of paper and that helps me retrieve it".

Of the five students who mentioned mind mapping, three indicated that they had tried it but didn't find it worked for them (L221C, L210E, L210F). Only one student (L120D) used them extensively.

"I know that really worked for me sort of in topics [....] you could show the relationships [....] I prefer that sort of diagram to a long list of things".

One student, L221D, used mnemonics as an aid to memory. L140E was the only student who talked about representing sounds in memory. The only use of physical response was reported by L140D who talked about how he named or described what he saw as he

"went to work or whatever".

The students of Spanish in this sample were noticeably more inclined to visual and other memory strategies. Perhaps this is a function of their previous Spanish learning experience largely outside school?

The use of mechanical techniques, as indicated above, mainly involved writing out words and phrases. This is obviously necessary if words are stored and grouped in the ways described above, but in a number of cases, students referred to this as their strategy for remembering words, whether they grouped them, or placed them in context or not. Others highlighted significant words and phrases (L213B, L213D, L210C) or wrote them out on big sheets of paper or post-its and stuck them up around the house where they would see them regularly (L210A, L210E, L130A). This latter activity might also be considered a form of regular review. Structured review was not a widely used strategy. Despite their intentions, few students made a point of reviewing lists of words due to lack of time,

"the ideal [....] I would have time then at night , before I went to sleep, to sort of cover one side of the page and then see how quickly I could learn them [....] but I found I just hadn't the time" (L210A).

Of those who explicitly mentioned reviewing, four said they *"went over things"* (L130B, L210F, L230D, L210C) without going into details about

how they did it. A few others “*tested*” themselves using the look, cover and say method (L140A, L221C, L210D). Apart from these methods, the only other review strategy was described by L213A who would from time to time

“open the dictionary on any page or any double page and find that as time’s gone on, I know more and more”.

This could no doubt provide considerable encouragement.

The extensive reading and listening and additional speaking activities which students engaged in also gave them an opportunity to see how their vocabulary was developing, to monitor progress and evaluate how much had been learned. Many evaluative comments were expressed in negative terms, i.e. how often they found they had forgotten words or had to look them up again. The issue of memory and age was clearly a worry for some students in both groups as 70% of the sample were over 50. Comments from users and non-users reflect beliefs that memory declines with age and this affected strategies adopted. For example, L230B commented

“I think it’s a matter of age [...] I find it’s more difficult to remember things”.

She made random lists of words in context and looked at related words and expressions when checking in the dictionary, but did not use other strategies as she thought she would find that difficult. On the other hand, L213A had tried a range of different strategies including association, imagery and mind mapping

“anything I can do to remember things .. the biggest problem is fear [of forgetting] you see”.

Many students commented explicitly on conditions that enhanced their vocabulary development, noticeably more than for other skills. Students reported that they had realised the significance of interest in the topic or personal relevance (users: L221A, L230A, non-users: L210F, L230D, L210E, L210D), the importance of context (users: L230C, L221C, non-users: L140D), their need to write things out (users: L210A, L120B, non-users: L130C, L210C), and their need for visual images (user: L140B, non-

user: L140E). They also indicated awareness of other strategies or techniques, and their preferences (users: L130B, L221C, L221B, L213A, L140A, non-users: L120D, L221E, L221D) although it was not always clear whether they had actually tried alternatives or had simply read about them.

Both groups could be said to take an 'active' approach to vocabulary development. There were very few who claimed to do nothing at all. Many focused on meaning by putting the word into context and seeking practice opportunities. The strategies used most can be categorised as memory and metacognitive. Users tended to a more systematic approach and made less use of the mechanical strategy of simply writing words out. Beliefs about the decline of memory with age influenced some students' approaches. Hurd (2000: 71) found this to be a widespread belief among L210 students in her study. Yang (1999: 532) suggests teachers need to foster positive beliefs and remove misconceptions. More help to experiment and understand how memory works might be beneficial for some students. There was a considerable degree of awareness of the conditions that enhanced their own vocabulary development. However, in some cases, choices had not necessarily been made on the basis of direct experience. Worries about memory did not always lead students to experiment with memory strategies (Yang, 1999: 530).

Grammar development

Students used many of the same memory and metacognitive strategies as they had to develop their vocabulary, often talking about grammar and vocabulary together as they described their 'dossier'. Those who had systems for grouping their vocabulary also stored notes on grammatical structures grouped by categories such as regular/irregular verb forms and linking words, or by function. They also put the new structures into context by constructing examples with personal relevance to themselves, looked for opportunities to use them and used the same review methods. Cognitive strategies were important in the development of grammar and students also made limited use of social strategies as shown in Table 4.9.

Table 4.9 Strategies used for grammar development

Strategies	Users	Non-users
Recognising and using formulas and patterns	5	1
Using resources	5	5
Reasoning deductively	3	1
Analysing expressions	1	1
Analysing contrastively	1	0
Taking notes	1	3
Summarising	0	1
Asking for clarification or verification	2	0
Co-operating with proficient users of the language	2	0
Total who spoke about grammar development	14	14

Using resources was the most frequently mentioned strategy. Students used a variety of grammar books. L213C felt that a good grammar book was particularly important as the course materials often present simplified rules when, in fact, the picture may be more complex.

“We need to know those complications exist, even if we find it difficult to grapple with them”.

Other students might not agree with this perspective and course teams endeavour to spare students unnecessary details, but the Department regularly receives complaints or criticisms that grammar teaching in the courses is not completely accurate because it simplifies specific points.

Compared with other language skills, more students expressed self-evaluative comments that they found grammar easy or enjoyable (users: L230C, L140B, L213A, L130A, non-users: L210F, L230D, L210E, L221F, L130C). This does not mean that they were always able to apply it appropriately in communication, but obviously some viewed grammar exercises as a pleasurable intellectual activity. Two non-users made notes on

grammar points despite acknowledging familiarity with them (L210E, L130C). Nevertheless, three users identified grammar work as a priority due to gaps in previous knowledge and lack of confidence (L140A, L221A, L213B). Three students, only one of whom identified problems with grammar, felt that the course materials did not supply sufficient grammar exercises (L221A, L221F, L213C).

Interest in grammar for its own sake may be related to a tendency to see language learning more in terms of word/sentence level activity and avoidance of functional practice (Yang, 1999: 529). However, students, particularly users, talked about looking out for and recognising structures in the course of communication. They were aware of 'noticing' examples when listening (L130B, L140A) or reading (L221A, L210A, L213B). They enjoyed working out rules and applying them.

"Whenever I meet a subjunctive, I want to know why it's there" (L210A).

'Noticing' also helped them to monitor their progress and gain encouragement. L221A noted how her confidence was boosted by spotting examples in magazines of the grammar which she had studied. Williams (2001a) highlights the importance of the tutor or peers in encouraging 'noticing'. In a distance context, the issue is how to ensure they have the opportunity to do so. Apart from 'noticing', experimenting with grammar and monitoring progress during functional practice activities, some users explicitly referred to social strategies to develop their grammatical knowledge. L221A sought the help of a private tutor to help clarify grammar gaps. L130B asked her tutor for tips and explanations. She also clarified structures by working with more proficient students in a self-help group. L140C clarified points with native speakers.

Explicit comments on conditions that enhanced grammar development were limited, but similar to those for vocabulary development. For example, the importance of contextualised examples (user: L221C) and of creating examples in a personally relevant context (user: L140A, non-users: L120D, L230D), their need to write things out (non-user: L210E), and their need for

visual images (user: L210E). L221D had adopted a new, more effective approach to storing grammar items. There were no other indications that students had considered alternative techniques.

Students apparently adopted a less 'active' approach to the development of grammar than vocabulary, but this is probably because many judged their knowledge to be well up to the requirements of the course. Users were perhaps slightly more focused on meaningful practice and communication. As might be expected, the cognitive strategy of using resources was the most common. They showed some awareness of conditions which facilitated the development of their grammatical competence.

The findings for research question 1 indicate that these OU distance learners are actively involved in developing their receptive and productive skills. The majority of both users and non-users demonstrated characteristics of the 'good' language learner and displayed elements of deep, autonomous learning. They employed a range of active strategies, engaging in functional practice focused on meaning. At the same time, they showed a developing awareness of their language learning and progress.

2. To what extent do OU distance language learners demonstrate the capacities of critical reflection and autonomy?

The literature review explores the nature of critical reflection and its relationship to autonomy. The literature suggests that certain types of activity/strategy use may be seen as evidence of the capacities of critical reflection and autonomy. Reflection has been broken down into the metacognitive strategies of planning, goal-setting, reviewing, self-monitoring and self-evaluation which can be related to the stages in Kolb's learning cycle and have also been related to autonomous and successful language learning (Cotterall, 1995, Wenden, 1998; Rivers, 2001; Hurd, 2001). In language learning these strategies may be represented in 'noticing', using feedback and drawing conclusions. When engaging in reflection, 'attending to feelings' (Boud *et al.*, 1985; Benson, 2001) is important and requires affective strategies. Others have argued for the

significance of social strategies to enable reflection (Brookfield, 1987; Newton, 1996; Convery, 1998). Awareness of one's existing knowledge, skills and assumptions ('reflexiveness') and questioning of assumptions, applications or judgements ('critical analysis', Schön, 1983) provide evidence of critical reflection. Key themes throughout discussions of critical reflection, deep learning and autonomy are the conscious nature of processes and active involvement of the individual. In language learning, this means production of the target language and activation of the language outside the 'classroom'. Control of pedagogical or functional activities (Rowse and Libben, 1994) provides evidence of autonomy or 'self-management' (Candy 1991) in the OU context.

The findings for research question 1 include evidence related to this question which has not been repeated here. They indicate the extent to which students used metacognitive strategies, were actively involved in their learning, sought meaningful practice activities and took functional control. At the same time, many students showed awareness of conditions which enhanced their learning, particularly in relation to development of listening and writing skills and vocabulary extension. (See pages 76, 87, 92.)

To explore the extent of pedagogical control, students were asked about how they used the course materials, whether they worked through them as presented, or whether they changed the tasks or used the materials in other ways. Table 4.10 summarises the findings.

Table 4.10 Ways of using course materials

Activities	Users	Non-users
Worked through as set, (may skim or omit some)	9	9
Focused on assignments, left out a lot of the materials	0	3
Re-ordered activities	1	0
Extensive listening/viewing of tapes	6	4
Played cassettes in car	3	2
Total commenting on ways of using materials	12	12

As found by Rowsell and Libben (1994), students were unlikely to take pedagogical control by addition, repetition, transposition or change of the set tasks, but rather ‘trusted the methods prescribed’. L213C remarked

“I take the view that you are the practised ones at it”.

Others expressed great satisfaction with the materials (users: L221C, L140B, L213A, non-users: L210E, L210D, L140D) for example,

“I couldn’t have wished for better” (L210D).

Only L221C reported re-ordering activities

“because of the train travel [to work] I frequently went on ahead [...] when maybe I hadn’t seen the visual parts yet”.

The main changes reported were to skim or read through activities rather than actually doing them, or to leave them out completely. The reason given for these changes was lack of time. This emerged as a strong theme in the interviews and is discussed in the findings for research question 4. The activities most likely to be omitted, as already noted, were those requiring a piece of writing. Some preferred to skim rather than skip activities in case they missed something. (L130B, L210C). L210C ran into difficulties attempting to cover everything,

"I'm very obsessive you see [...] I have to do every little exercise once I start .. because I feel I'm leaving out something important [...] but I ran out of time and just listened to have an idea what it was about".

Three non-users concentrated on the assignments and ignored a lot of the course work (L213D, L221E, L130C),

"As the course went on, more and more of my efforts were aimed at the assignments rather than the course materials" (L213D).

L221E repeated earlier comments about the lack of relationship between the course materials and the assignments as justification for this approach.

Extensive viewing and listening with the audio/video material was the only other significant alteration to the prescribed study pattern. Sometimes this was for an overview (users: L120A, L120B, L130A, L221C, non-user: L230D) or to fill in activities which they had missed out (non-users: L213D, L210C). Sometimes it was because they found the material particularly interesting (users: L213B, L221B, non-users: L140D, L210C) or in the case of the audio dramas, wanted to know what happened next (users: L230B, L140C).

The findings for research question 1 indicate the use which students made of metacognitive strategies associated with critical reflection: planning, self-monitoring and self-evaluation. They also indicate how the latter were linked with affective and social strategies. To explore use of metacognitive strategies further, students were encouraged to talk about where they felt their strengths and weaknesses lay and the extent to which they were able to identify priority areas to work on, setting goals and objectives. They were also asked how their approach to study had changed, and what advice they might give to anyone just about to embark on the course, to explore what they had learned about their own learning. Users had been encouraged to identify priorities, self-monitor and self-evaluate via the project materials. The influence of the project materials is re-visited under research question 5. Table 4.11 summarises students' priorities.

Table 4.11 Students’ priorities

Priorities	Users	Non-users
Grammatical accuracy in speaking and writing	8	4
Intonation	2	0
Pronunciation	2	0
Oral fluency	3	2
Range of expression in speech	1	1
Including sufficient information (oral/written tasks)	5	0
Summarising key information	2	0
Planning/structuring essays	2	0
Keeping to the question	1	0
Using more academic language	1	0
Spelling and accents	1	0
Understanding fast native speakers	2	1
No particular priority	0	7
Total commenting on priorities	16	13

The table shows that users were able to identify quite specific priorities often related to the skills audit sheet which formed part of the project materials. There is an apparent mismatch between the numbers prioritising grammatical accuracy and the lack of readiness to complete writing activities or the confidence expressed about grammar. However, as already noted, knowledge of grammar rules is not the same as being able to use them accurately and fluently in oral or written communication which may have been the underlying concern here. Many users engaged in communicative activity to develop and monitor such fluency. Students may also be influenced by experience and traditional views of language learning which put a high premium on grammatical accuracy.

Non-users, on the other hand, mentioned few specific priorities apart from a desire to improve accuracy in speaking and writing. They sometimes interpreted this question in terms of their interests and motivation for learning rather than their strengths and weaknesses.

“it’s good to have a bit of everything [...] but I was more interested in the speaking, listening, for myself” (L120C).

This student, like L140D, expressed a general desire for improvement.

“I think I just wanted to improve”.

For some (L120C, L221D, L210C, L210F), the priority was to complete the course as best they could

“I can’t sit down and think about what my next priorities are going to be because I’ve got to get on with the next activity” (L221D).

These comments reflect concerns about lack of time. Prioritising might be one way of alleviating these concerns. Some students may have felt no need to consider their approach because they got good marks for their work (McCune and Entwistle, 2000).

“I was never concerned I wasn’t going to get reasonable marks” (L213C).

When asked about changes made to their approach as a result of their experiences on the course both groups of students showed awareness of what helped them learn and a capacity to self-evaluate. Table 4.12 summarises responses to this question. These reflect some of the learning about language learning reported for individual skills in the findings for research question 1.

Table 4.12 Changes in approach

Changes	Users	Non-users
More focused on priorities	3	0
Listen for key points rather than everything	3	0
Get an overview before listening for key points	1	0
Realised importance of content as well as accuracy	1	0
More use of tutor feedback	2	2
Think and work in target language rather than English	1	0
Try to write accurately and cut down on checking	1	0
Plan study time to fit other commitments	1	0
New strategies for remembering vocab/storing grammar	0	2
Total commenting on changes in approach	10	15

Users’ comments reflected items from the project materials. Non-users did not identify many specific changes, but interpreted the question as a request for an evaluation of progress made. 8 non-users identified improvement in general or in specific areas such a vocabulary, pronunciation, fluency and comprehension (L210E, L210F, L221D, L221E, L120D, L230D, L130C, L140E).

“I can read the newspaper a lot better now than I could”
(L230D).

“I can snap back rude answers” (L140E).

Not everything was progress, however, L210E felt that she had lost confidence in her spoken French despite improvement elsewhere

“because I’m more aware of the pitfalls”.

Although they were aware of the progress they had made, some were also now aware of what they might or, perhaps, should have done, possibly as a result of discussion in the interviews. For example, L210F felt that she should have tried to use some of the learning suggestions in the course and

L221F realised that she needed to move away from a word level to a meaning focus in order to improve her comprehension.

“I think what I’m doing is I’m analysing a sentence instead of understanding it as a whole”.

L213D felt she should have researched the course more carefully beforehand to understand the level of commitment required.

Despite being able to evaluate their progress after the course had finished, several non-users made comments indicating that they found self-assessment and self-evaluation difficult as suggested in the literature review (Race, 1993; Little, 1995; Matsumoto, 1996; Broady, 1996; Thorpe, 2000), due to their beliefs, or lack of experience. In Hurd’s study (2000) over two thirds of the L210 students involved indicated they had difficulties in this respect.

“It’s a technique of sort of self-criticism that doesn’t come easily to me” (L221D).

“I don’t want to change anything because .. a change means you’re going back doesn’t it” (L140E).

When asked about the advice they would give to new students about to embark on the course, both groups mentioned a variety of metacognitive, affective and social strategies, summarised in Table 4.13.

Table 4.13 Strategies suggested for new students

Strategies	Users	Non-users
Organising work	2	5
Setting goals and objectives	2	2
Purposeful work	1	2
Seeking speaking practice opportunities	4	4
Co-operating with peers	2	2
Encouraging yourself	3	1
Discussing your feelings with others	0	1
Total giving advice for new students	13	13

This advice may represent both the strategies which students found useful and things they wished they had done differently. Non-users gave greater emphasis to the need to be organised and self-disciplined as study was likely to take rather longer than the OU suggests.

“Take with a very large pinch of salt the Open University’s idea of 13 hours a week” (L210F).

L140E felt that it was important to

“make a physical commitment”

and had set up a desk and book-shelf in her bedroom.

“you have got to set yourself a rigid timetable and stick to it [...] because if you don’t, that’s when the problems arise” (L210D).

Two users (L140A, L213B) talked about organisation, but in a more goal-oriented way

“They need to assess their own work and then set aside times to study” (L140A).

Some students talked about the need for clear goals, or focused work.

"I would recommend them to fill in these self-assessment forms .. I think it's been ever so helpful to sort of focus on strengths and weaknesses" (L120B).

L210C had also come to the conclusion that it was useful to identify strengths and concentrate on weaker areas if time was short.

"you can waste a lot of time just by doing things you don't really need".

L210E and L213D also emphasised the need to be selective. L213B, L230B and L130C spoke about the need to have a reason for studying whether for a qualification, interest in the country or some other purpose and to focus on what you want to get out of the course. L230A pointed out the need for strong motivation, particularly in the face of adverse reaction from friends, if you are not studying for a qualification or other obviously instrumental purpose, as otherwise

"it seems like a madness at times, when you don't need it for your life or job".

Twelve comments suggested the need to seek speaking practice opportunities and the benefits of getting together with other students, not just in tutorials. In this, they emphasised the importance of social and affective strategies. Students recognised the need for encouragement. For example, L221C talked about the need to enjoy the work and not to labour over anything that isn't interesting.

"You need encouragement and not to be pessimistic about what you can do" (L140A).

L140D felt it was important to remember that

"there are people not as good as you".

L230A felt the support of family and friends was crucial. Only L120D suggested chatting to the tutor about any worries. Perhaps others took that for granted, but as shown in the findings for research question 6, the level of contact with tutors outside tutorials or assignment feedback was very limited.

From this evidence and the findings for research question 1, it appears that both users and non-users demonstrated a degree of critical reflection and autonomy. They showed awareness of what helped them to learn, and of some alternative strategies, i.e., a capacity for “reflexiveness”. They took functional control and engaged in functional practice activities to develop speaking, listening and reading skills and to extend their vocabulary. The main difference between the two groups is seen in the way users were able to identify specific priorities and changed their approach to study. This group showed some evidence of “critical analysis” in that they had begun to question previous assumptions about language learning and had made changes accordingly. Perhaps as a result they felt somewhat more in control and more satisfied with their studies? None of the non-users mentioned the enjoyment and satisfaction which new students might derive from their courses whereas several users did (L221C, L210A, L140B, L213A). This will be examined further under research question 5 when the response of users to the project materials is discussed.

3. To what extent do the language learning materials, activities, and assessments in OU Language courses encourage reflection on learning and learner control?

As explained in Chapter 3, a sample of the course materials, the course guide and assessment books for each course were reviewed together with the *LLGSG*. This review explored the extent to which courses encouraged “self-management” and “learner control” (Candy, 1991: 73). The course materials were examined for:

- instances where students are encouraged and given time to make choices about activities (other than deciding the correct answer), to experiment with or add to their repertoire of strategies and make decisions about the way they study the course,
- opportunities, encouragement and guidance to reflect on and make decisions about their learning and the strategies they employ,

- support for and opportunities to practice self-assessment and evaluation beyond comparison with model answers.

All students receive a copy of the *LLGSG*. This book encourages students to become aware of how they learn, to identify their strengths and weaknesses (p.3), to define long-term language learning objectives and set clear short-term objectives (p.5). It also suggests prioritising objectives. This section is fairly brief, it contains some examples, but no activities to give students experience of working through this process. The *LLGSG* then goes on to consider how best to organise study time, and emphasises the importance of being prepared to learn from mistakes and take risks

“good language learners take risks” (p9).

It suggests using mistakes to assess areas of understanding or where further practice is needed, but gives no practical examples of how to do this.

The *LLGSG* suggests a variety of ways to make language study ‘active’ (p.10), it suggests the need to self-evaluate by checking answers against the models given in the course and re-doing activities later to see how much better/faster they can be done (p.13). There are no practical activities to develop checking skills. There is more detailed guidance on how to record progress (p.14) and a suggestion to note techniques found to work well. They are encouraged to reflect on their learning (p.14) with a couple of suggestions i.e. making regular checks on progress and trying to practise speaking without the support of activities, texts or notes as well as advice to ‘notice’ language patterns and try to work out the rules for oneself. The remainder of the *LLGSG* gives a range of strategies and techniques for developing receptive and productive skills, vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation and intonation as well as suggestions for creating opportunities to use the language in spoken and written form.

The *LLGSG* clearly draws on the characteristics of the ‘good’ language learner. It has two main messages: 1) be aware of your learning, try alternatives and find what works for you 2) be active in your learning. It contains plenty of suggestions, but they are couched in general terms rather

than as activities related to the student’s course of study. Some aspects need more practical development, i.e. defining and prioritising objectives, using feedback, monitoring performance, self evaluation and reflection on learning. However, such material is of limited value if students do not use the *LLGSG*. Users and non-users were questioned about this. Their responses are summarised in Table 4.14.

Table 4.14 Use of *LLGSG*

Uses	Users	Non-users
Read at start of course, no further use made	5	5
Read at start of course, returned to it at times	6	2
Found aspects particularly useful	3	1
Found it irrelevant	0	1
Felt they should have made more use of it	2	1
Total commenting on the <i>LLGSG</i>	12	9

Most had read the *LLGSG* at the start of the course, but then the course took over. More users reported using it as a reference during the course and returning to it for help with particular problems (L120B, L221C, L210A, L230B, L213B, L140A). Some thought that the ideas might have influenced them, though they couldn’t point to any specific examples (L130A, L230A). Generally there was a feeling that it was a ‘good thing’ though some recollections were hazy. As it is issued with each course, students may have used it previously rather than in the current year of study. Reactions may depend on level of competence. L130B had previously considered it a

“load of bolony”

when studying the advanced French course where she felt far more confident. Returning to a less familiar language, she felt the advice was far more useful,

“with French I knew what my motivation was and why I was doing it, what my goals were. With German I’m not

quite so clear about that and therefore I need to be thinking about it a lot more”.

Two users felt it was particularly useful for people who had been away from study for a long time (L230B, L213B).

Non-users had made less use of the *LLGSG* and had some negative comments. L221F thought it was irrelevant. L230D remarked that

“all these techniques are very good if you only have 500 words to learn, but if you’ve got a hundred thousand to learn it would be a full-time job really classifying everything and trying to put them into order”.

L210D preferred to stick with the vocabulary learning method she was familiar with rather than trying other techniques. L120C summed up a common response

“I had a quick look through at the beginning and then put it away”.

Course materials¹ were examined to see whether they encouraged use of this resource. The results are shown in Table 4.15. As noted in Chapter 1, there had previously been little evidence that tutors encouraged their students to use the *LLGSG* in the same way that they encouraged use of the grammar book. Tutors who used the project materials were giving greater focus to learning strategies development and did refer students to the *LLGSG* either directly or via the skills sheets (see Appendix 1). This might account for the greater use and more positive response by users of the project materials.

¹ 1999 editions. Revised versions of L120 and L230 were presented in 2002.

Table 4.15. Summary of review of features in course materials

Features	L120	L221	L210	L130	L230	L213	L140
Self-assessment opportunities	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Self-assessment teaching	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✗	✓
Self-assessment practice	✗	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✗
Opportunities for reflection	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓
Teaching about reflection	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗
Reference to <i>LLGSG</i>	✗	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓
Strategy Teaching	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Explicit strategy practice	✗	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓
Choice/decision opportunities	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓
Evaluation of performance	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Self-evaluation teaching	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗
Self-evaluation practice	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗

A broadly similar picture emerges for all courses. There were opportunities for students to engage in self-assessment. All courses offered model answers which students could use in order to check their own answers. Courses varied in the extent to which they gave any explanations or suggestions as to how to use these models. L130 and L230 explained how to use open-ended models. L230 and L140 gave advice on how to check through one’s work. L221 used an icon to refer students to the *LLGSG*, although this was used sporadically and with ever-decreasing frequency. L140 was the only course which made more extensive reference to the *LLGSG* within the course books and built activities around the advice or strategies suggested in it. Other courses simply referred students to the *LLGSG* in the Course Guide which is separate from the main course materials and appears to have a similar fate to the *LLGSG*. It tends to be read at the start of the course (indeed Course Guides generally carry an exhortation on the cover to ‘read this first’) and is seldom returned to.

Few the courses offered what could be considered explicit teaching about how to self-assess, although some offered advice on how to use the model answers and others offered some opportunities to practice or gain experience of assessing performance. For example, L210 *Notes on Language and Style* provided diagnostic activities each month which students could use to test their existing knowledge. L210 also included an opportunity to assess knowledge at the start of each topic. L210, L221, L230 and L213 provided revision activities and L230 also provided a comprehensive monthly chart showing where each point had been covered. L230 was the only course at that time to have self-marked assessments (SMAs) which allowed students to check their grammar and vocabulary learning. None of the courses provided explicit instruction or structured practice for self-evaluation though they all included opportunities for students to evaluate their progress and invitations to do so. For example, L140 advised students to consider their performance and make a note of what they found easy or more difficult. Other courses suggested considering performance and repeating activities to try to improve on it. All courses had some form of checklist or list of key learning points to help learners evaluate their performance, but without structured practice. Only L120 provided guidance in how to use the checklists.

None of the courses offered explicit instruction on the nature of reflection, or how to reflect on learning or review experience, despite suggesting that students should do so. In the introduction to L221 Book 1 (p. 5), it suggested that

“time taken to review your learning is time well spent, the important thing is that you find ways that work for you”,

but there were no indications of the sorts of questions which students might ask themselves. It is likely that students understand ‘review’ as ‘see how much you can remember’. L210 and L140 course texts were more explicit, inviting students to think about work completed and note feelings and reactions to material or tasks. Other courses confined such invitations to the

Course Guide, which, as noted above, may not be referred to very much once the course has started.

All courses included some teaching about strategies and techniques for developing particular skills, expanding and remembering vocabulary or grammar. Very often these took the form of suggestions or tips and frequently these were presented in the Course Guide or via reference to the *LLGSG* within this Course Guide. Within the actual course materials, L210 offered the most extensive range under the *boîtes à idées* sections throughout the course. Unfortunately they appeared to be randomly scattered and there was no summary, should a student want to locate all that relate to a specific skill, e.g., listening. L130 had a number of *Lerntips* but these did not feature regularly and often suggested making notes about something rather than presenting a strategy or offering any practice. L140 was the only course to include regular skill development sessions referring to strategies in the *LLGSG* followed by practice activities. Other courses taught and practised some specific strategies, e.g. note-taking (L210, L213), summarising (L230, L221), vocabulary development/mind mapping (L221, L230), translating (L230, L213, L210), text analysis (L210), preparing oral presentations and planning written work (L213, L210).

Most courses appeared to invite some limited degree of decision-making, though it might only take the form of a suggestion in the Course Guide to choose strategies that suit. Even this suggestion appeared to be missing from L130. L221 invited students to select vocabulary to learn because it appealed for some reason. Revision sections offered some opportunities to choose relevant activities according to need, however even in L230 where the relationship between the checklist and specific revision activities was clearly stated, choice was not explicitly invited. However, the course did offer a selection of optional pairwork activities. L213 invited selection of articles from the *Materialienbuch* on the basis of interest. L210 suggested that the *Notes on Language and Style* could be optional depending on experience. L120 indicated choices which could be made when using the

end of unit checklists. These appear to be the extent of explicit choices or decision-making opportunities.

Assignment tasks and guidance notes for all courses for 1999 were reviewed against Biggs' hierarchy of generic activities (2001: 89) representing deep or surface approaches. (See Appendix 4 for information about assignments)

Table 4.16 summarises use of these activities by course.

Table 4.16 Generic activities used in assignment tasks

Generic activities	L120	L221	L210	L130	L230	L213	L140
reflect			✓				
apply: far problems							
hypothesise						✓	
relate to principle							
apply: near problems							
explain		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
argue	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
relate			✓			✓	✓
comprehend: main ideas	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
describe	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
enumerate	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓
paraphrase	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
comprehend sentence	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓
identify, name	✓			✓			✓
memorise							

The assignment tasks employed verbs from the lower half of the hierarchy, particularly those verbs which represent surface level activity. The tasks and guidance for Level 1 courses closely prescribed what should be included and relied on identification and enumeration in descriptive tasks. L130

specified the number of points required for each part of a task. Students are expected to use their own words, or paraphrase the original rather than copying, although limited re-cycling is permitted. All courses expected comprehension of ideas in the stimulus material, but in order to supply the required information this generally meant comprehension at sentence level. The activity encompassed by the verb 'argue' at Level 1 was usually to give an opinion, and back this up with reasons. Students commented that they did not have enough space for this and it may have seemed a small part of the task since it was the last point in the list of things to be included. Also, the marks for this aspect of the assignment accounted for only 12.5% of the total as opposed to 25% for the information content points. At Level 1, only L120 included guidance about the balance and stated that half of the assignment should be devoted to the development of one's own ideas. L140 appeared to make greater demands on students by asking for explanation, for more use of imagination and by asking for comment on social changes. L140 also gave guidance on planning, and on writing introductions and conclusions.

Level 2 30 point courses involved explanation. The style of argument expected remained similar to Level 1. L221 appeared to link the aspects of giving information and expressing opinion and indicated that the latter should form at least half of the assignment. It did not specify a list of points to be included. These changes gave a less constrained feel to the tasks than for L230 which continued to specify the number of points to be included for each part of the task and did not suggest the balance between them. Apart from the topics and the amount of work to be produced, there was little else to distinguish the style of task from Level 1 assignments apart from the fact that they were presented entirely in the target language.

The 60 point level 2 course assignments used more activities at a higher level in Biggs' hierarchy. This might be expected since the courses are no longer purely concerned with language development, but also profess to develop ability to handle content in the target language. L213 asked students to hypothesise on several occasions, by asking "*what would happen if...?*"

At this level, the lists of detailed content points disappeared and there was greater concentration on the ideas. Students were asked to describe, explain and draw out relationships or make comparisons. Arguments were expected to demonstrate analysis, students were asked to draw conclusions and substantiate their suggestions, recommendations or opinions. L210 asked students to reflect on the way they produced their final extended essay as the final spoken assignment. L213 had an identical final written assignment, but no reflective spoken assignment. These two extended essays were the only assignments where students were offered a choice of question. By the final essay, both courses were expecting academic referencing of sources, but suggested what these sources might be. The balance between information and analysis was not specified.

In summary, the review showed that language courses offered information about a variety of strategies and suggested that students use them, but gave relatively little opportunity to practise them in order to make informed choices. Much of the advice about strategies was situated within the Course Guides rather than within the teaching materials. Students were given the opportunity to make a limited range of decisions. They were encouraged to reflect, self-assess and self-evaluate, but there was no explicit teaching or guidance to support development of these metacognitive strategies or the capacity for critical reflection. These are the very aspects of learning which, according to the literature, students find difficult, a view supported by this study. Assignments also presented virtually no opportunities for choice and the style of task was likely to evoke a surface approach in most cases. It seems that exhortations to “self-management” and “learner control” were not supported and developed in practice.

4. What impact do the style and pace of OU Language courses and their assessment have on students’ approaches to learning?

Evidence from students, reported in the findings for research question 1, also suggested that the nature of the assignment tasks evoked a surface approach. Biggs (1988) identified other major factors encouraging a surface approach as perceived lack of control and workload/time pressure. The

findings for research question 3 indicate that the course materials and assignments offered little by way of explicit opportunities to make choices and take control although only a sample of the materials was examined. The questions of workload and time pressure will now be explored.

Both non-users and users commented frequently about shortage of time. In part this was due to the other commitments which part-time adult learners have. However many comments, summarised in Table 4.17, indicated a concern about the volume of work to be completed.

Table 4.17 Comments on time and workload

Comments	Users	Non-Users
Experienced shortage of time	12	12
No problem over time	0	1
Unable to do the extra practice they wished.	4	5
Unrealistic workload estimate by course team	2	4
Got behind in their studies and omitted activities.	3	6
Got behind and put in extra hours to catch up.	2	0
Ended up focusing on TMAs	3	5
Felt stressed by the course.	1	3
Total commenting on time/workload.	12	13

The findings for research question 1 indicated the extent to which students tried to engage with the target language beyond the course. 4 users (L140A, L140B, L140C, L213B) and 5 non-users (L210D, L210F, L221F, L130C, L213C) commented on not being able to do some of the ‘extras’ which they would have liked or expected to do, both using the target language and developing their learning skills.

“I would very much like to have read more widely into Spanish literature”(L140B).

L210F thought the course contained many useful suggestions for skills development but

“one doesn’t have the time to do all the things you would like to”.

Lack of time to use the language or develop skills increased frustration and this could be particularly important in view of the way students used functional practice to assess progress, encourage and motivate themselves.

Both users and non-users got behind with their studies. In the findings for research question 2 it was reported that some students skimmed through activities or regularly missed out time-consuming activities, such as writing practice exercises. When asked specifically about whether they ever got behind with their studies, students talked about trying to salvage more serious situations. Some had fallen substantially behind at some point and generally ended up focusing on the assignments and abandoning much of the material. Although only 3 non-users admitted doing this when questioned about their use of the course materials, it now became apparent that a sizeable proportion (25%) had in fact adopted this approach (users: L210A, L140A, L213B and non-users: L213D, L221E, L130C, L120B, L210E).

“I couldn’t keep up with the course work, I kept up with my TMA” (L210A).

L210E explained that she usually worked on the TMA and the course material in parallel so that when time was tight, she would just look at any relevant grammar and topic content. Lack of time appeared to force students into reluctantly adopting an ‘achieving’ approach.

Both groups felt that their predicament was caused by the unrealistic expectations of the course teams.

“I think in general the OU have a totally unrealistic time thing” (L230A).

“the sheer volume of content” (L213C).

Although, as noted earlier, students were positive about the materials and in many cases totally enthusiastic about learning the language, in this respect, students described very negative feelings. Words such as

*“rush”, “struggle”, “stressful”, “frantic”, “frustrated”,
“irritated”, “pressurised”*

were used. They reflected Ellis’ metaphor (2001b) of the language learner as “sufferer”. Several mentioned that they would not have managed without the support and understanding of partners and friends (L221F, L210D, L210F, L140C). Four students clearly felt stressed by the whole process (L210A, L210D, L210F, L221F).

“I found the course very pressurising [...] it’s not been a good thing for me” (L221F).

The volume of negative comment appeared to be greater from the non-user group, although this group included the only student who suggested that he had no time problem and felt that

“everybody has actually got some time to do the things they want to” (L230D).

The level of frustration and pressure may be linked to the way in which the volume of work and style of assignments appear to push students towards adopting a surface/achieving approach to their study. This approach is linked to the lack of control and choice described in the findings for research question 3. At the same time, the findings for research question 2 showed that the non-users did little to prioritise their work or take control by consciously deciding to omit or skim activities on the basis of analysis of their strengths and weaknesses. The user group did make more effort to prioritise and this may have helped to increase their sense of control. Ramsden (1992) suggests that anxiety plays a role in inducing a surface approach. The levels of stress and worries about keeping up reflect a high degree of anxiety.

“I didn’t dare [get behind], I got up at five in the morning” (L140E).

The findings for research question 1 also indicated high levels of stress and anxiety generated by the spoken assignments. Ramsden (1992) and Moon (1999) suggest lack of interest or perceived relevance as further factors encouraging a surface approach. This did not apply here. Many identified strongly with the language and the culture it represented or had a professional reason for learning and found the course materials highly relevant.

Although students tended to a deep approach in the ways they tried to develop their language skills, it seems that the pace of OU Language courses and the nature of the assignments produced the opposite effect. A perceived heavy workload, with no invitations to choose activities or take control of pedagogic functions, forced some students to adopt a surface/achieving approach, focusing on assignments. They may not have 'needed' the qualification, but having embarked on the course, wanted to do the best they could. Issues of personal satisfaction and self-esteem were involved. Others became frustrated and irritated because they could not engage with the language and materials as they wished. A few found the levels of stress and anxiety just too great. Workload, the nature of the assignments and anxiety all encouraged a surface approach.

The tension between students' interest and desire to understand and communicate meaning and their frustration at being pushed into a more instrumental approach impacts on their experience of study. Their relative ability to handle this 'disjunction' affects their perception of the course and how they talk about it to others which has implications for recruitment. On the whole, the user group presented a somewhat more positive view of their experience than the non-user group, perhaps, as already speculated, as a result of having been prompted to establish priorities, make choices, and take control of their work. On the other hand, perhaps this was because they had already established effective learning strategies. It seems that course teams need to take a hard look at reducing course workloads, and build in opportunities for student choice and control. This would need to be combined with teaching and practice in the areas such as reflection and self-

assessment as suggested by the findings for research question 3. Ways of reducing the stress levels in oral assessment need to be explored and assignment tasks using activities in the middle and upper zones of Biggs' hierarchy need to be developed, bearing in mind that a certain focus at word/sentence level may be inevitable in a language course (Ramsden, 1992: 49).

5. Is it possible to develop the capacity for critical reflection, self-assessment and self-evaluation at a distance?

Boud *et al* (1985) suggest that it is possible to develop the capacity for reflection by working through Kolb's learning cycle. They argue that an effective way of achieving this is through encouraging learners to engage in conscious reflective activities immediately linked to a learning experience. The literature review identifies researchers who propose specific techniques (Race, 1993; Thorpe, 1995; Brockbank and McGill, 1998; Moon, 1999). As explained in Chapter 3, the project materials were designed to encourage learners to work through the stages of the learning cycle in relation to the learning experience of preparing for and completing an assignment.

Researchers point to the difficulties many learners have with the notion of reflection (Dewar *et al.*, 1994; Matsumoto, 1996; Hanson, 1996; Thorpe, 2000). Others (Boud and Walker, 1993; Newton, 1996; Moon, 1999; Harrison *et al.*, 2001) note a multitude of barriers to engaging in reflection. These include the learner's attitudes, beliefs and experience, their need for time and space to engage in reflection, clear explanations and rationale for the activity and strategies to guide the process. The literature review also raises questions about the feasibility and legitimacy of reflecting alone (Wildemeersch, 1989; Brookfield, 1987; Convery, 1998; Brockbank and McGill, 1998).

Interviews explored students' reactions to the project materials and why they decided to use them or not. Analysis of the questionnaires provided background context indicating the extent to which the different project materials were used and valued as well as reasons for non-use. Interviews with users explored their experience of using the project materials at a

distance to find out whether they could foster development of the metacognitive strategies involved in conscious reflection and produce “critical analysis” (Schön, 1983) or “analytical thinking” (Ridley, 1997) about their learning. Interview data was also examined for perceived barriers to reflection and the impact of affective factors in a distance context.

Questionnaire distribution is described in Chapter 3: Sample selection. Table 4.18 shows the numbers who declared they had used the materials or not and the numbers willing to be interviewed. The return rate was 43%. Criteria for selection of interviewees are also explained in Chapter 3: Sample selection.

Table 4.18 Number of questionnaire returns from users and non-users

	Total sent	Users	Interview✓	Non-users	Interview✓
French	172	46	14	22	10
German	70	20	9	12	4
Spanish	61	21	6	9	6
Total	303	87	30	43	19

67% of students returning the questionnaire said that they had used some or all of the project materials. If it is assumed that those who did not return the questionnaire probably had not used the project materials, then this means that 29% of students in the groups concerned chose to use them. Non-users were asked to give reasons for their decision. These are summarised in Table 4.19.

Table 4.19 Questionnaire Item 4: Reasons for not using the project materials

Reasons	Number
Appeared to require too much time, represented an extra pressure	17
Appeared off-putting, irrelevant, wanted to get on with ‘real’ work	10
Already confident in study skills, not wanting to challenge current habits	6
Found ideas useful, would have used them under other circumstances	6
Didn’t receive them	5
Forgot about them	2
Already aware of weaknesses	2
Felt education is getting too ‘form bound’	1
Total giving reasons	32

Lack of time for additional work was the most frequent reason given. For example,

“I felt very short of time, I even found it difficult to review my tutor’s comments so this just seemed an additional burden” (L221 student).

Students apparently felt that they did not have the ‘space’ for reflection due to the workload, reinforcing the findings for research question 4. The next most frequent responses reflect the strength of attitudes and beliefs or past experience, e.g., the belief that activity should focus on language rather than learning strategies or keep to tried and tested techniques

“I did not want to challenge/revise my established way of working through these courses” (L230 student).

These responses also include some who found the actual technique for reflection a barrier.

“I prefer to do any analysis in my head, not in writing”
(L230 student).

Five non-users expanded their comments during interviews. Two (L221D, L120C) were concerned about time and the challenge to existing habits.

“You have to sort of streamline what you’re doing to the time you’ve got [...] as soon as I realised that they were these analytical things I thought oh no, and put them aside” (L120C).

Three felt they were already competent learners (L130C, L140D, L210C). The questionnaire and interview responses from non-users demonstrate a number of the suggested barriers to reflection. They could be reactions to this specific technique and the way that it was introduced separately from the course materials. The findings for research questions 1 and 2 indicate that non-users in the interview sample nevertheless demonstrated some capacity for critical reflection and autonomy. Hurd (2000: 76) also found that the L210 students she surveyed had become more aware of their own learning during their studies, but she was not able to say which elements of the course had led to ‘metacognitive experiences’.

Table 4.20 summarises the responses from users to the quantitative items on the questionnaire. These items established which project materials had been used, how much time they took and how users rated them. Some students omitted answers to some questions and there are discrepancies between totals for certain questions. n=87

Table 4.20 Responses to quantitative questionnaire items

Responses		Number
5. Used skills audit?	Yes	76
	No	11
6. Where used?	Home	65
	Tutorial	3
	Both	8
7. Time taken?	Up to 30 minutes	59
	30-60 minutes	17
	Over 60 minutes	2
8. Easy to use?	Yes	69
	No	5
10. Complete and send self-assessment form?	With every TMA	31
	Twice	20
	Once	18
	Didn't send any	14
11. Time taken?	Up to 30 minutes	68
	30-60 minutes	7
	Over 60 minutes	1
13. Time spent on tutor feedback?	Up to 30 minutes	61
	30-60 minutes	16
	Over 60 minutes	7
14. Complete Part 2, new priorities?	Yes	32
	No	55

15. Time taken?	Up to 30 minutes	30
	30-60 minutes	4
	Over 60 minutes	0
16. Use 10 tips?	Yes	52
	No	33
17. How useful? Audit 4=Very useful: 1=Not useful	4	20
	3	28
	2	13
	1	6
17. How useful? Self-assessment sheet 4=Very useful: 1=Not useful	4	9
	3	23
	2	21
	1	14
17. How useful? 10 tips 4=Very useful: 1=Not useful	4	12
	3	22
	2	19
	1	7

These responses confirm findings from the pilot study that using the materials did not necessarily take a lot of time and was straightforward. It appears that the reflection sheet (part 2 of the self-assessment sheet) was used least. The self-assessment sheet received the lowest rating. Interviews explored both of these areas in more depth. The questionnaire invited qualitative comments on the difference which the materials made to users' study. These are summarised in Table 4.21. Of the 76 comments, 45 (59%) indicated that the materials had made a positive difference to the way they approached their study.

Table 4.21 Questionnaire item 18: difference made by project materials to approach to study

Responses	Number
Focused efforts	17
Recognised strengths and weaknesses/took account of these	12
Made me give more thought to key areas/how to tackle problems	12
Found them helpful in unspecified way	5
Made me more self-critical	3
Prompted me to set targets for myself	1
Will use more in future	3
Had good intentions but didn't really use them/forgot about them	2
They made little or no difference	21
Total responses	76

Questionnaire item 19 invited additional comments. There were relatively few responses. Of these, 10 were made about time pressures and how they could have made better use of the materials given more time. 4 explicitly commented that they did not feel confident in self-assessment.

The questionnaire responses indicated that the materials had prompted students to give more conscious attention to aspects of their learning. Interviews examined users' experience of the project materials in more depth. 15 commented on the audit. 10 indicated that it had helped them to review their learning, set goals and objectives by breaking down the language skills and reminded them that accurate grammar was not the only thing required. For some, it meant facing up to what they already knew, but perhaps tried to ignore.

"I think to some extent I was aware of where my weak spots were .. so there was a conscious effort to drag myself

away from the comfort zones .. so that .. this is the bit I must do now” (L213B).

3 users (L230B, L120A, L120B) found the audit more difficult.

“It seemed a little daunting” (L230B).

L120B felt that it was easier to use once you had experienced an assignment. The remaining 2 students felt that their learning skills were already adequate.

The self-assessment sheet received the lowest rating on the questionnaire. Interviews with users indicated a number of reasons why students found it difficult or unhelpful. Table 4.22 summarises these interview responses.

Table 4.22 Interviewees’ problems/difficulties in self-assessment

Problems	Number
Difficult to say what they had done well	5
Not enough time/always completing assignment at last minute	5
Marks always high so difficult to identify any problems	1
Priority didn’t change, therefore seemed a waste of time	2
Difficult without any points of comparison until after first TMA	1
Tutor’s response did not encourage further use	3
Initially put off by the idea of self assessment	2
Total commenting on the self-assessment sheet	16

Nobody felt that the sheet was difficult to complete in itself. However, 11 of these comments indicate lack of confidence or unease about self-assessment. This may relate to the lack of teaching about self-assessment and the lack of opportunities for practice identified in the findings for research question 3. The need for such teaching and practice is highlighted in the literature review. The age profile of the students may also be a factor as many would not have been exposed to such ideas in the course of their

previous educational experience. Students who found it less of a problem had such experience (L221C, L140A, L140C, L213B).

"I've been used to either selling myself, or criticising, evaluating what I do" (L213B).

Some suggested that it would be better to say

"things I think I have done reasonably well" rather than "well".

Perhaps this reflects a cultural attitude combined with lack of understanding of self-assessment? Perhaps it reflects the challenge of committing oneself to a judgement that the tutor may or may not support in a situation where one does not know the tutor well, if at all. In a few cases, students found that the response from their tutor did not fulfil their expectations (L221A, L210A, L230A). They had hoped for specific advice on how to tackle problems but this was not provided, so they stopped using the sheets.

In contrast, six users reported that the response from their tutor had in fact encouraged them to persist despite initial scepticism or antipathy. Their tutors provided specific advice and direct responses to their comments.

"I definitely wasn't going to do it [...] but J. turned it round on me [...] her remarks on the things were excellent" (L230C).

Some were delighted to find their tutor agreed with them or reassured them they were worrying needlessly.

"Sometimes I was pleasantly surprised that she disagreed with me .. that something that I thought I'd done abominably, she thought I'd done quite well" (L221B).

L130B expressed the view that

"it got better as we went on through the course",

indicating that using the project materials and gaining experience of self-assessment, with appropriate feedback from the tutor, helped students to

gain confidence. The tutor’s role is discussed in the findings for research question 6.

The questionnaires indicated that relatively few users completed the reflection sheet, (part 2 of the self-assessment sheet) although use was higher than in the initial study. Table 4.23 summarises interview responses about use of the reflection sheet.

Table 4.23 Interviewees’ use of part 2 of the self-assessment form

Uses	Number
Worked through feedback as suggested and filled this in.	6
Worked through feedback as suggested but did not fill this in	7
No change in priorities, therefore did not fill this in	1
Total commenting on use of part 2 of self-assessment sheet	14

The questionnaire item had asked if users had *completed* this form as opposed to working through it, and a majority, 55, had not. The interview responses show that although 8 users did not complete the form they nevertheless worked through the process of reviewing their tutor’s feedback and re-examining their priorities. They had various reasons for not writing anything down. For example, lack of time (L221C) or way of working,

“I find this very difficult to sort of talk to myself in writing [...] it’s just that there’s various sort of things that don’t really work for me” (L230C).

By contrast, L120B felt that it was a very good idea to write things down as

“otherwise you could go on being pretty vague”.

L140B summed up a broadly positive view of the process,

“I thought that was really helpful, to, you know, really look carefully and analyse the comments”.

Comments from a few students raise a question about whether writing aids the process of conscious reflection or whether it is encouraged as a way of

demonstrating reflection. The generic materials, on which the project materials were based, were designed to enable students to have a record of evidence to submit for Key Skills accreditation in “Improving Own Learning and Performance” should they wish to do so. The OU is currently piloting an optional assessment unit for this Key Skill (U071). Changes in Higher Education referred to in Chapter 2 mean that some form of evidence of reflection may be necessary in future. It seems that mature students without previous experience of this approach may have some difficulties here, without support and opportunities for practice. Thorpe (2000) points out that use of techniques to develop reflection has to be underpinned by a rationale that pervades the learning programme. In this research, the tutor provided the rationale with very limited support in the course materials. The ways in which the tutor was able to convey and support the rationale during the course are examined for research question 6.

Interviews explored users’ reactions to the ‘10 tips’ sheet which offered advice on what to do when an assignment is returned. The aim of this sheet is to encourage students to ‘return to the experience’ and ‘attend to feelings’ before moving on. It supports the reflection sheet. Results from the questionnaire show that more students found them useful, but opinion was divided. 15 users commented on this material during the interviews. 8 talked about the usefulness of individual points or the sheet in general. 5 indicated they had tried to apply all or most of the principles. 2 felt they were simply stating the obvious and common sense. Four ‘tips’ were singled out for particular comment: tip 4, to give yourself a ‘pat on the back’;

“it’s a good idea this pat on the back when you have done something right .. you can very easily put yourself down”
(L230A);

tips 8 and 9, to make a note of feedback points to help set new priorities (as opposed to doing it mentally),

“noting it down and doing it more formally that’s where I missed out and that’s how I think of it now .. missing out .. because I do think it’s useful” (L230B);

tip 10, to set realistic goals,

“you can’t get everything right all the time” (L230A).

These comments perhaps highlight the importance of helping students to deal with their feelings and to direct attention to positive features of their performance. This aspect of reflection appears to be particularly problematic in a distance setting, yet the course materials pay very little attention to this. L230A noted that her tutor had encouraged everyone at the start of the year to look at the ticks on their work before looking at the detailed feedback. Students need awareness of what they are doing well and why, but tutors may be inclined to give greater emphasis in their feedback to what needs improving. The project materials may help to give greater focus to the positive on both sides.

Previous research (Schrafnagl and Fage, 1998) indicated that students made little active use of their tutor’s feedback. The project materials prompted students to reflect and act on this feedback. The questionnaire, therefore, asked users what they did when they received their tutor’s feedback and the same question was asked of both users and non-users during interviews. Interviewees were also asked about how they reacted to the return of assignments. Table 4.24 summarises questionnaire responses from users. Some students gave several answers, others did not complete this question.

Table 4.24 Questionnaire item 12: Users' action on tutor feedback

Action	Number
Read comments	50
Noted points	12
Worked on weaknesses for next assignment	9
Corrected mistakes	8
Listened to the comments, played tape two or three times	8
Made mental notes	8
Studied feedback to identify serious errors	7
Compared with self-assessment, noted points for improvement	7
Read tutor's comment on self-assessment	5
Looked up anything unsure of	5
Collated comments, analysed tutor's comments	3
Kicked myself for being stupid	1
Searched for signs of progress	1
Referred to it frequently	1
Discussed points with tutor	2
Checked understood feedback	2
Filed it for future reference	5

Although "read it" was the most frequent response, many others indicate 'active' engagement with the feedback. Relatively few went through to look things up or correct their mistakes, although this is advocated by tutors who may indicate types of errors rather than giving corrected versions and refer students to course books and grammars. However, there is evidence that the feedback prompted 'noticing' of particular points and that a number of students were using the feedback in order to identify priorities to work on. Very few actually approached their tutor to discuss the feedback.

More detailed exploration was possible in interviews and responses are summarised in Table 4.25. Most students read or listened to their feedback. A difference seemed to be whether they literally just ‘read’ and ‘listened’ to it, or read and listened carefully and interacted with the feedback in some way, even if they didn’t write anything down.

Table 4.25 Interviewees’ action on tutor feedback

Action	Users	Non-users
Read or listened only	2	5
Read and highlighted, made notes, added to ‘dossier’	5	2
Read carefully and made mental notes	6	5
Read and listened and compared with self-assessment	6	0
Consulted reference books	5	1
Re-wrote sections	1	0
Listened carefully and made mental notes	7	3
Listened and repeated/practised	4	7
Never listened to feedback	0	2
Total commenting on use of feedback	16	14

It appears that users interacted more with the feedback than non-users, although the latter engaged in more repetition practice. The difference may simply be due to the specific needs of the individuals. Users focused on the detail of how they used the feedback.

“I transposed some of the comments onto the things I intend to do to improve [...] I would definitely go off and look at the grammar book if she suggested it” (L120B).

Some made a point of reviewing their self-assessments. L140C always tried to look at this alongside her assignment and felt that the tutor addressed her expressed difficulties. L221C, on the other hand, had found her tutor’s response frustrating as it referred her to the grammar book which she had

already consulted extensively without success. However, she did not raise this with the tutor. Likewise L213A couldn't see what was wrong with his attempts at complex sentences, but didn't contact his tutor,

“this is sort of the second year at university level [...] I used to think perhaps I should know this” (L213A).

This indicates the influence of learners' preconceptions about the nature of university study as well as about language learning. There were some specific comments about how the material helped them to make better use of tutor feedback to develop their skills (L130B, L140C, L120B, L230A). For example L130B noticed she adopted a more thoughtful approach compared with previous courses,

“that was the good thing that came out of that, yes, whereas with the other ones perhaps you have just rushed on”.

These students along with two others (L130A, L221C) made comments that indicated that they had become more aware of their language learning and their preferred strategies as a result of reflection on their assignment feedback.

Non-users focused more on reasons for not engaging with feedback or doing so in a limited way. Once again, time was mentioned as a reason for not doing more. L140E commented that after reading the feedback

“we had to get on with the next one”.

She also noted, however, that

“of course the next assignment wasn't built on the first one”.

This needs to be examined further to determine whether this student's perception is borne out. McDonough (1999: 7) notes that action on feedback depends on the nature of the next assignment. Students are less likely to act on feedback to develop their skills if the focus of the assignment changes each time. They may need more awareness of the way in which they can transfer skills even though the topic area and format has changed.

L130C supported McCune and Entwistle's (2000) suggestion that good marks may be a disincentive to acting on feedback. He looked at the marks and skimmed the comments. If there appeared to be no major problems, he just put it away. He never listened to his tutor's comments,

"tutors were so enthusiastic and so good, that you actually felt guilty not listening to the tapes and the comments at the end".

L213C's problems in accepting any sort of criticism meant that he certainly didn't listen to the comments. L140D didn't go back to the tapes either,

"I was just glad to get it over to be honest".

This is a view that is regularly heard from students who have no desire to revisit a stressful experience and hear themselves again. This appears to be further evidence of affective factors as a barrier to developing the capacity for reflection.

For L221E, the difficulty lay in getting to grips with the spoken feedback

"because you can't pore over it [...] I think it would be more helpful if it was written .. but you couldn't do the pronunciation or intonation".

Tutors tend to avoid duplication of effort by giving advice on linguistic points and pronunciation on the tape and commenting on content and organisation on the feedback form. Some taped commentaries are quite long and students may well find a summary of key points helpful. Tutors worry that, if they do this, students won't listen to the comments on tape. The Department of Languages has not as yet researched the impact of tutor styles of spoken feedback, or students' preferences.

Only one non-user commented on the significance of the feedback. He noted the amount of effort put into it by his tutor and therefore resolved to

"put in a corresponding amount of effort to make sure I understood what she was saying" (L221D).

He also noted that this was a key feature of distance learning and

“so my feedback from the TMAs was something I thought particularly important to make the best of”.

The return of an assignment is an occasion when strong feelings may come into play and distance learners have to deal with these alone. Comment above indicates how beliefs may prevent students from deploying the social strategy of asking for clarification or verification. Reactions to a returned assignment can have an impact on how, or even whether, a student continues to study. During the interviews, users and non-users were encouraged to talk about their reactions to receiving a marked assignment. Table 4.26 shows that positive and negative reactions were evenly split between both users and non-users.

Table 4.26 Interviewees’ reactions to assignment return

Reactions	Users	Non-users
Positive	7	6
Negative	6	5
Total commenting on assignment return	13	11

The reasons for these reactions were examined. Naturally, good marks were a source of pleasure and satisfaction. However what constituted a ‘good’ mark varied. L140E felt her marks were

“not too bad [...] I think the lowest I got was 80%”,

whereas L130C felt that anything over 65% was OK. L230A thought that perspective changed with age,

“I wouldn’t have worried about getting 68 in school, but now it annoys me intensely”.

By contrast, L130A was completely thrown by getting 100% for a spoken assignment,

“I was terrified to open my mouth after that”.

Some users expressed frustration and disappointment and feeling “knocked” (L221A, L221C, L210A, L213A, L230A, L213B). The sources of this

frustration and disappointment appeared to be the gap between their expectation and the marks received or a lack of explanation, encouragement or response from their tutor to a specific need. For example, L221A was disappointed when language, which she thought she had checked and understood, turned out not to be accurate after all. L221C was frustrated by being told she had 50% of the required points, but not what they were or what was missing. L213A and L213B described the shock of low marks for their first assignment as they had not realised the difference in demands compared with the previous course. The gap between expectation and results could be due to the lack of experience in self-assessment and evaluation or due to misunderstanding of the task or language content. The development of self-assessment and self-evaluation would, therefore, help in management of affective factors.

Non-users had similar reasons for negative reactions but spoke more strongly about the feelings engendered by the arrival of the assignment. For example

“always I felt quite ill with fear” (L210F),

“rush to the marks, get really frustrated and then read the comments when I’ve got over the shock” (L210C).

These comments also seem to indicate a lack of ability to self-assess and evaluate their own performance. L210C also gave an example of how the tutor’s feedback can have a negative effect

“when I got the first comment about my accent, it stopped me talking for quite a while”.

The difficulties of delivering feedback at a distance and ensuring students receive the message intended are discussed further under research question 6.

The responses from users indicate that materials like those used in the project can help distance learners working in isolation to develop the capacity for critical reflection, self-assessment and self-evaluation at a distance. The project materials provided a framework which students found

relatively easy to use, but which could be more effective if supported through the course materials and tuition. It appears that users became more alert to the skills which were required for the tasks they had to perform and were more likely to prioritise those skills which they personally needed to develop. They became more aware of their language learning strategies, so they were in a position to question assumptions and make changes, displaying a degree of “critical analysis” as described for research question 2. Through using the project materials they gained experience and confidence in self-assessment. They reflected on their performance in order to identify new priorities. Reactions to the return of assignments emphasise the need for more consistent development of these strategies at different levels within the course materials, if barriers such as lack of time and negative feelings are to be overcome. More research is needed into the ways in which students can be supported in ‘attending to feelings’. The format of the project materials and the stress on written reflection was a barrier for some. For this reason, and because of the tensions surrounding any attempt to ‘prescribe’ methods of reflection or autonomous working, it seems important to continue to present such materials as one route to enhanced effectiveness, rather than as a requirement. Finally, if the nature of assignment tasks changes from one to the next this may also deter students from acting on feedback. A more developmental approach to task design may be needed.

6. In a distance context, how do tutor expectations and approaches influence learners’ use of the project materials and development of capacities for conscious reflection and decision-making?

The role of Open University language tutors is to facilitate students’ study of a programme designed and prepared by a course team. They mediate the course materials and help develop students’ ability to use the language they are studying via a limited number of tutorials and through feedback on students’ assignments. They are also responsible for grading these assignments. Tutors are expected to check on students’ progress from time to time and to respond to questions or concerns about the course and its

content. Tutorials take place approximately once a month during the course (studied from February to October) and are optional. Assignments are due at regular intervals (See Appendix 4). Assignment feedback is the only form of contact tutors have with **all** their students. Table 4.27 shows the extent of other contact which users and non-users in the interview sample had with their tutors.

Table 4.27 Student contact with tutor

Contact	Users	Non-users
Attended tutorials as often as possible	14	12
Did not attend tutorials	1	3
Contacted tutor between tutorials	4	4
Number commenting on contact with their tutor	15	15

The majority in both groups tried to get to tutorials when they could, but work and other pressures kept them away. They were generally positive about the tutorials and a number regretted they could not attend more.

“I had to miss one or two [...] I had another engagement, but I certainly found them good” (L210F).

Some study at a distance because of personal preferences.

“I wasn’t going to bother with tutorials [...] I prefer doing things by myself [...] but then eventually I did go and of course found them essential” (L130A).

These pressures and preferences prevented three students from attending any tutorials (L221E, L210C, L130C). L221A did not attend as she was afraid of making a fool of herself in front of others. Two students on the Channel Islands (L130B, L213D) had tutorials by telephone.

Eight students contacted their tutor between tutorials as a social or affective strategy, asking for clarification or verification or discussing feelings with others.

"I sometimes felt I could have phrased things better and I would ring my tutor and ask her when it would be convenient to ring her back" (L210A).

L210D found family pressures too much at times.

"I'd email my tutor and say how I was feeling". [His encouragement was] "what kept me going and deep down I think I just wanted reassurance".

Other students' contact with their tutors was limited to apologising for absence from a tutorial or asking permission to submit an assignment later than the due date. Students explained that either they felt no need for more extensive contact,

"I didn't feel that I needed to" (L230B),

or they saved their queries for a tutorial,

"I tended to write lists of things and ask at the tutorials" (L140A).

Some found other ways to get them answered,

"I had access to other support" (L213C),

or they made do without,

"she made herself very available, but I just didn't make use of that" (L120A).

Several made a point of saying that they would have felt able to make contact if necessary. L230A summed up the issue,

"I think none of us really ring up our tutors enough [...] I realised sort of afterwards that I should have rung up about this and that".

This low level of contact from students (also reported by Schrafnagl and Fage, 1998) and the irregular attendance at tutorials highlights the significance of the assignment feedback as a vehicle for communication between tutors and students. It emphasises the importance of establishing of a comfortable relationship via initial contacts and the first tutorial.

This examination of the level and nature of student contact provides some background to the tutor interviews. These explored the way tutors introduced the project materials, the ways in which they supported use of these materials through the year and the impact they perceived. Appendix 8 lists the tutors, their tutorial groups and experience of teaching for the OU. Table 4.28 summarises how tutors introduced the project materials to their students

Table 4.28 Methods of introducing the project materials to students

Methods	Number
Introduced them at an early tutorial	17
Gave out audit and self assessment sheets only at this tutorial	12
Gave out everything at this tutorial	3
Mentioned the materials/ideas in their introductory letter	3
Mentioned the ideas in an introductory phone call	1
Sent the materials and an explanation to non-attenders	12
Total number of tutors introducing the materials	17

As students generally make a big effort to attend the first tutorial to meet their tutor and fellow students, it is not surprising that most tutors opted to introduce the materials at this stage. T6, T8 and T12 delayed until the second tutorial so that there was not such a long gap until the first assignment (in April for Level 1 courses). Most tutors limited what they gave out in an attempt to focus attention and because they recognised that students generally feel overwhelmed by the volume of material and other correspondence from the university at the start of the year. 12 explicitly mentioned sending the materials and an explanation to absentees.

The manner of introduction varied. Five tutors mentioned including activities in the tutorial which focused on learning strategies, encouraging an exchange of ideas as well as enabling students to share their feelings

about some aspects of study. For example, T14 described an icebreaker where students talked about how they studied, how often etc.,

“I think it was quite reassuring for them because they realised that not everybody was doing everything three times a week”.

The rest explained the project materials to the group. Several Level 1 tutors did this in English to avoid misunderstandings. Other tutors used the target language but pointed out the English versions on the sheets. Some tutors indicated the arguments they used to persuade students to use the materials. For example, T3 presented it as something which she would find useful as it would enable her to give more pertinent comments and help them more. T7 suggested

“it could help us [...] strike up a better working relationship”.

T12 said

“it helps you plan a bit more effectively”.

Few emphasised the voluntary nature of the materials this time, following experience in the pilot study, although T1 left the students to decide whether to take copies or not. Although they explained it, none of the tutors mentioned giving students time to work through the audit in the tutorial, where they would be on hand to offer support and advise on strategies for achieving goals. Responses to the questionnaire confirmed that students worked on this at home. Table 4.27 indicates that students are very unlikely to have contacted their tutor about it. In view of student concerns about self-assessment and self-evaluation, and the lack of explicit teaching in the courses, this would seem to be an area which tutors could develop in tutorials.

Tutors were asked whether they had incorporated learning strategies into their teaching in any way and how they had used or encouraged students to use the project materials. Table 4.29 summarises the responses.

Table 4.29 Tutor use of/encouragement to use the project materials

Methods of use/encouragement		Number
Skills Audit		2
Self-assessment sheets:	Regular replenishment/encouragement	8
	Had not thought about replenishment	2
	Source of tutorial activities	1
10 Tips	Sent out on return of first assignment	6
	Discussion of tips	1
Skills sheets	Sent selectively to students as needed	8
	Used in tutorial activities	2
	Gave copies of every sheet to all	2
	Did not use at all	2
Tutorial activities	No specific strategy development	7
	Difficulty in distinguishing strats/lang	2
	Incorporated more work on strategies	7

Only two tutors referred to using the skills audit. T1 had explained which skills were involved when presenting the intended outcomes for tutorial activities.

“It helps to spell out why we’re doing it and which skills they’re using”.

T2 had compiled a checklist based on the audit and the assessment criteria for the course and provided opportunities for her students to use it from time to time to assess their own and other students’ work. This was the only example of explicit development of self-assessment. The tutor emphasised the need to first build a climate of trust and felt students were very supportive of each other, but realistic in their assessments.

Most comments about the self-assessment sheets concerned the mechanics of distributing fresh sheets after each assignment either by post or at the tutorials. Six tutors made a point of sending a form back with each assignment whether or not the student had previously used one, along with an encouraging comment.

"I put a little note on [...] just in the hope that they might..." (T8).

In some cases this persistence paid off and students did actually return one the next time. T11 tried it at first

"but then I stopped doing that because otherwise it's a sheer waste".

Two realised that they had not given this any thought which accounted for why they had not received any sheets from students after the first one! T8 mentioned that students' self-assessment sheets had helped her decide on some language points to cover in tutorial activities. There were no examples of tutors using the sheets to support additional practice in self-assessment.

Six tutors specifically mentioned sending the 10 tips out to students when they returned the first assignment but it is likely that others did too. These six particularly emphasised that they had sent them to all students, not just those opting to use the project materials. T15 added a note to draw attention to them and advised students

"don't ignore them, because they are all well worth, you know..."

T16 made a point of going through them at the tutorial as well.

"I'm not treating them as idiots, but you can't make unreasonable assumptions because they come from all areas [...] a lot of them haven't had any experience of correspondence tuition".

She illustrated this with an anecdote about a student who had told her that he just put the assignments in a drawer when they came back. She talked through with him what he should do with them instead. He arrived at the

next tutorial with a list of 37 points which he hadn't really understood about the corrections. This certainly reinforces the need to teach students how to review and use feedback.

Findings for research questions 1 and 2 indicated the extent to which students were aware of and used different strategies to develop their language skills. Findings for research question 3 indicated the extent to which the courses introduce students to learning strategies and offer opportunities to try them. Tutors have an opportunity to extend awareness of alternatives, encourage choice and invite students to try them via their assignment feedback and tutorial activities. The skills sheets are one way in which tutors can bring alternative strategies to students' notice where they appear to be in need of suggestions and encouragement to try them. These sheets also refer students to advice in the *LLGSG*. Eight tutors sent selected sheets to their students in the way that was intended. Two also made them available at tutorials for students to take if they wished (T6, T16). T1 sent them to students according to need, rather than according to whether they were using the project materials or not. T11 personalised them,

"usually I use a highlighter and highlighted bits and pieces that I find particularly relevant to them".

T3, on the other hand, had not used them as she felt she could give her own more individual suggestions. T14 was new to tutoring with the OU and found similar problems to students in managing the paperwork,

"in retrospect I think I could have sent some people some of this [...] it just didn't occur to me at the time .. I mean to be honest, there are just so many bits of paper every time you do this marking".

Two tutors reported using the skills sheets in tutorials. T9 had used specific sheets as a handout to back up a tutorial on speaking skills. T6 used them as the basis for a brainstorm and discussion about the strategies people were adopting.

"They always seem very interested in each other [...] how they tackle things, they really are more keen, even the experienced language students, to hear what other's feelings are .. perhaps we feel it is a waste of time, but they didn't".

L230A supported this view from the student perspective,

"I wish they remembered that we need [...] time to talk to each other [...] I think it's very helpful to hear how people are coping."

These comments point to ways in which tutorial time might be used to help students handle the affective factors involved in language learning.

Although assignment feedback is the only form of tuition which reaches all students, tutorials offer an opportunity for awareness raising and perhaps the only chance to try out different strategies for language skill development, in the absence of such activities within the course materials. Seven tutors indicated that they now incorporated more work on learning strategies into their tutorials. Perhaps as a result of having taken an OU language course herself, T6 felt she had changed her outlook on organising tutorials. She had become much more aware of the need to help students to 'attend to feelings' by giving time for discussion of tasks. For example, what they had found hard or easy, what they anticipated the next task would be like, how they felt about the topic, or which bits they were going to enjoy. T7 described a series of tutorial activities to help students write summaries using their own words, to explore ways of enriching their vocabulary, remembering words and phrases and making their language more complex in style.

The activities described by tutors were later shared and taken up by others in subsequent years. Their effectiveness depends on the degree to which they are made explicit to students (Chamot, 2001). Several comments indicated unease about this. For example T5 talked about trying to slip it in

"without the students noticing .. we have so few tutorials [...] you have to be careful for the students to feel that

*everything they are doing is directly related to the course
[....] what they all want is to speak French in the
tutorials”.*

This may reflect Little's concern (1999: 2) about the risks associated with devoting time to strategy training rather than language learning. More target language awareness raising practice activities are needed, particularly for Level 1 students. T13 and T16 commented that many students want to practise the language points for the next assignment. T16 noted that it was possible to combine such practice with input on techniques as these help to improve performance. In this way it is possible to appeal to the 'achieving student' and to raise awareness.

An equal number of tutors said they didn't devote tutorial time to strategy development. T4 felt there had been no need as

“the group was so good”.

T3 and T11 felt they would be able to do so the following year having gained experience in tutoring. T3 felt that it was far more effective to ask students to think about things and draw their own conclusions rather than 'telling' them ways of approaching their learning. She would be looking to set up ways for students to explore issues and share ideas. T1 and T10 felt they were now being more explicit about the intended outcomes of tutorials. T14 and T17 reported difficulty in seeing the distinction between strategy development and the sort of language skills practice which they had always been engaged in. They perhaps reflect Chamot's finding (2001: 39) that some teachers think they are focusing on skills but are not making this explicit to students.

Tutors varied considerably in the extent to which they used the project materials or encouraged use by students and the extent to which they tried to develop students' learning strategies. From a group of apparently enthusiastic and committed teachers, perhaps one might have expected more? However, it may be that this enthusiasm and commitment remained at an intellectual level rather than being transferred into practice as suggested by Dickinson (1987).

The positive view which tutors had of the materials and their impact was reflected in their responses to a question asking for any comments about the materials. Ten tutors were happy that they needed no further changes.

"I think they're fine" (T17).

"The learning from assessment thing is at it's best, you can't improve on that" (T15).

"It's heaps better" (T7).

The changes suggested by the others were concerned with layout and spacing, typing errors, wording of one or two items, and the need for some more specific listening skills advice and amendments to allow for differences in Spanish constructions compared with French and German. Tutors particularly liked the fact that the materials were

"user-friendly" (T1), "concise and simple" (T12),

"bilingual" (T4, T8, T9).

There was also appreciation of the skills sheets as an additional tool for responding to students needs,

"I felt I had something to offer" (T8),

and of the record sheets that had been devised so that tutors could keep track of what they had sent to whom (T5).

In contrast to the students, tutors were particularly positive in their comments about the self-assessment form. 10 commented on how useful they found the information provided by students.

"I found that was enormously helpful" (T7).

They reported feeling more confident in their advice, giving more personal, focused feedback, and being more reassuring. 6 commented on the way it improved communication with students,

"it was a real dialogue focused on the assignment work"
(T4).

This was important in view of the low level of regular contact with students. T7 also commented that it allowed students to

“get things off their chest”,

acknowledging negative feelings about the task or their performance. The references to dealing with negative feelings, reassurance, opportunities to motivate and encourage via feedback indicated that tutors were well aware of the affective factors at play in completing an assignment and receiving feedback. T6 sums up the situation,

“I think we are asking a lot of them aren't we? ..

emotionally .. probably more than other subjects really”.

The creation of a ‘new identity’ in the target language and the relationship between self-concept and self-expression particularly in oral tasks may bring considerable pressure and anxiety (MacIntyre and Gardner in Benson, 2001:71). The same tutor wondered

“what have I been doing to them for the last 5 years?”

However, these comments also indicate a need for reassurance and “dialogue” on the part of the tutors. Writing feedback at a distance to people you hardly know involves making assumptions about them and their needs. It is easy to get it wrong, or to hold back in case the analysis isn't correct. Is the student being careless? Do they have no grasp of adjective endings? Were they very short of time? Are they just ‘coasting’, doing the minimum to get by? Tutors welcomed any additional contact which helped to shed light on the situation and enable more relevant feedback.

All tutors responded to the comments made by students on the self-assessment sheets. The majority (13) did so by writing some comments on the assignment feedback forms only. T4 added a specific section headed ‘Learning from Assignments’, so that her response was clearly identifiable. 4 others also wrote brief responses on the self-assessment sheets,

“It helped them to see if I had really looked at their comments” (T6).

However, comments from students reported under research question 5 indicate that sometimes, tutors’ responses were not what students expected,

or did not address their needs sufficiently. This might be because students themselves were not specific enough. T14 suggests this,

“there was very little I could latch on to because it was just vague [...] I found it very difficult to reply to”.

This seems to confirm the need for further work on the types of feedback students find helpful, as well as assisting students to look in more detail at aspects of their performance. More direct dialogue about feedback is needed between students and tutors (e.g., George, 2001). Tutors in this project were beginning to incorporate language learning strategy development into tutorials and assignment feedback, but gave little attention to the development of self-assessment and self-evaluation. It appears that more support and development is needed in each respect as suggested by Thorpe (2000).

Tutors were asked to describe their students' reactions to the materials. Some were disappointed by relatively low take-up in their groups. As they found the self-assessment sheets so valuable, they wanted to receive more. Some sensed a general lack of interest in the audit when they presented it

“to tell you the truth they were not interested” (T13),

so this tutor decided to pass swiftly on.

“Some of them were a bit sceptical to be honest” (T14).

T15 realised students might have difficulty with this activity due to lack of experience, and understood the need to spend time on it at the first tutorial. However, as already noted, tutors presented it and left students to work through it at home, few used the audit in any way in their teaching. These comments contrast with the users' view of the audit as the most useful part of the project materials.

Tutors estimated take-up by the number of self-assessment forms returned with assignments, although lack of a form did not necessarily mean that students had not used any of the project materials. Table 4.30 shows the level of take-up.

Table 4.30 Estimated level of take-up based on self-assessments submitted

Number of self-assessments submitted	Groups
50% of group or more (10+ students)	5
30-50% of group (6-9 students)	3
Under 30% of group (0-5 students)	9

These estimates were based on the sheets submitted with the first assignment. In most cases numbers declined after the first assignment. Tutors were asked to comment on how students used these sheets. Table 4.31 summarises these comments.

Table 4.31 Tutors’ view of how students used the self-assessment sheets

Tutor responses	No.
Gave serious thought to their priorities and concerns	7
Commented on time/word count/personal situation, not performance	3
Unfocused comments	1
Completed it ‘to please me’	1
Set very unrealistic goals	1
Had difficulties expressing what they had done well.	4
Used form to respond to previous tutor feedback	2
Prompted students into sending other notes and emails	2
Only used by good students	3
Not used by good students	2
Used by both stronger and weaker students	2
Number commenting on how sheets were used	17

Some tutors implied that concerns about time taken, problems with the word count, or personal difficulties were ‘superficial’ or an excuse,

"They say, oh, my main problem is that I don't have time, and I'm always in a rush" (T17).

By superficial, they meant not directly concerned with language performance. However, the importance of these issues to students was recognised by others,

"I found that [section for any other comments] really useful because a lot of them come up with things [...] more personal to do with their studying" (T13).

The findings for research questions 1 and 4 also indicated the impact these concerns may have on students' approaches to learning. Tutors confirmed students' difficulties with self-assessment and self-evaluation, particularly when it came to saying what they had done well. T1 noted how students added words like *"I hope"* to their comments or left that part blank. T3 highlighted the potential for 'recipe following' (Boud and Walker 1993: 85) where some students completed the forms

"to please me",

but noted that others had given it much thought. The serious approach taken by most students is summed up by T6,

"they are really looking at their language development in a more critical way, which I don't think they would have done otherwise".

Tutors also commented that students were using the sheets as an additional channel of communication.

Opinions were divided as to whether stronger or weaker students were more likely to use the project materials. T3 felt that a good range of stronger and weaker students used them, whereas T4 saw her group as

"successful autonomous learners"

who didn't come to tutorials and didn't use the materials. T5 felt that weaker students didn't use them because they

*“don’t tend to be very reflective about their own learning
.. which is why they are not very good”,*

whereas good students used them to get even better. Some students had certainly felt that their learning skills were sufficiently developed not to need such materials. The results from the questionnaire indicated 60% of users had GCSE or no previous qualifications in the language studied compared with 40% who had A level or higher qualifications. The interview sample has a similar split. 7 of the 8 interviewees who had not studied their target language at school opted to try the project materials.

The main reasons tutors felt students did not use them were time and workload. Two tutors also felt the ‘extra paper’ was off-putting,

“it’s viewed as an extra piece of paperwork” (T8).

“I think they liked the idea, [...] it’s useful for their assignments, but it adds to the work load while they are doing them” (T11).

Six tutors saw themselves as the reason why students did not use the materials. They expressed concerns that they might not have introduced it with enough conviction,

“it’s difficult to be more forceful at the start” (T1),

or at an inopportune moment,

“perhaps [...] that has not been a good idea at the day school because there’s so much paper being given to them” (T12)

or

“it could be that I didn’t explain that properly” (T14).

Perhaps they didn’t reinforce the message or could have done more to follow up during the year,

“perhaps I should encourage them a bit more” (T17).

Tutors have a tendency tend to blame themselves when students drop out or don't come to tutorials and appeared to be doing the same here, but their responses may be honest evaluation.

Despite limited contact with students, their role in grading assignments means that tutors are in a position of some influence. They interpret the course and the assessment criteria to students. T8 identified an underlying problem with the project materials,

"if it was integrated into the course, then I think they would do it, it would have more validity".

The same probably applies to tutors, as suggested by Ho (1997). The findings show a generally positive attitude among tutors, particularly those who had already been involved in the pilot and disappointment where take-up was low. The fact that the project materials were separate from the course materials was hard to overcome. The project materials complemented some messages within the course materials. However, these messages were not strong enough compared with other features to produce 'constructive alignment' (Biggs, 1999: 11) between the project materials, the course materials, the assessment and the tuition, despite the professed interest of course teams in fostering independent, self-directed learners.

Tutors' positive comments on the project materials were countered by strong themes of concern about time and student workload running through the interviews. As mentioned above, tutors were very conscious of pressures on tutorial time as they met students so infrequently. This pressure was particularly acute at the first tutorial when there were other 'administrative matters' to deal with, for example, setting up contact lists (the basis for self-help groups) and checking students understood how to complete the assignment cover sheets. These are on top of tackling course content and trying to get a measure of students' capabilities. For example, T1 didn't go through the audit sheet with students

"because there was so much to cover".

T2 introduced the project materials in English to save time (although her group was at the most advanced level) and gave them out during a break in the main activity. T13 abandoned an activity based on the project materials when she sensed little interest,

"I decided it wasn't for me to push it onto them, I didn't want to waste forty five minutes, or even twenty minutes doing it".

Some commented on student concerns about time needed to use the materials (T2, T8, T12, T15),

"there was more reservation .. well this is going to take a long time" (T8).

T5 highlighted students' concerns about the time it took to do assignments, compared with the apparently unrealistic time suggested by the course team. Tutors of the Level 2 60 point courses were particularly aware of the volume of work which students had to cope with and the pressure of monthly assignments,

"it seems like a lot of extra work to students and an 'extra' on top of a very intensive course. Students' priority is keeping up and this is too much" (T2).

These comments from tutors suggest that although they took a positive view of the project materials, they nevertheless viewed them as an 'extra'. They recognised the heavy workload for students in the course materials and assessment and felt they had to respond to students' expressed needs for language practice in tutorials. Therefore, they probably could not help reinforcing the students' views as suggested by researchers such as Brockbank and McGill (1998).

Interview responses were examined for evidence of an attitude which supported self-direction and student choice. Table 4.32 summarises this evidence.

Table 4.32 Evidence of tutor support for self-direction and student choice

Support for self-direction/choice	Method	Number
Raising awareness of own learning	Activities to exchange ideas and feelings	5
	Activities to raise awareness of alternative learning strategies	7
	Activities to develop self-assessment and self-evaluation	1
	Clarifying intended tutorial outcomes in terms of language and learning skills	2
Promoting decision-making	Students choose which materials to take	2
	Encouraging students to think about what they do and draw conclusions	1
	Encouraging choice of strategy	1
	Seeking student feedback on activities to promote a more 'equal' relationship	1

Tutors appear to have undertaken some activity to raise students' awareness of their own learning, but done relatively little to promote student decision-making. It might be argued that raising students' awareness enables them to see alternatives and make choices about their approaches after trying new ideas. This evidence may not do justice to tutors, however, as it was gathered indirectly. Questions did not specifically focus on self-direction and decision-making to avoid 'leading' responses. This area would probably best be explored by observation at tutorials and an analysis of tutors' assignment feedback. Neither of these was feasible within the scope of this research.

Interview responses were also examined for evidence of a reflective approach to practice and tutors who had been involved in the pilot were

asked about any changes to the ways they had used the materials. Table 4.33 summarises these responses.

Table 4.33 Tutor reflections on use/impact of the materials on practice

Reflections on use/impact of the materials on practice		Number
Changes from pilot year	Presented them as ‘normal’ part of working relationship, rather than optional	1
	Explained them better after being in pilot, and working on guidelines	4
	Changed approach in tutorials, more focus on strategy development.	5
	Switched to eliciting more about learning strategies, rather than ‘telling them’	1
Insights gained	Would have been better not to give them all out at once	1
	As a student found it was easier not to keep switching languages	1
	Need to develop climate of trust to develop peer- and self-assessment	1
	Impact of feelings on learning	1
	Better idea of how to present and use them in future	3
Action/intentions	Discuss experience and techniques with others	1
	Work on developing student self-confidence	1
	Work on ways to help students see benefits of using them	1

Tutors who had participated in the pilot generally had higher levels of take-up, which they put down to their experience and confidence in the project materials, changes to these materials, changes in the way they introduced or explained them and the activities which they did in tutorials.

"I thought the whole thing was better structured than last year and that's why we did have better take-up" (T5).

"I've done things quite differently this year [...] the focus of my teaching has changed" (T9).

Only T17 said she had not made any changes and take-up remained low.

Tutors who had not participated in the pilot felt more confident about using the project materials in future. Some reported giving more focus to learning strategy development. T3 felt it had been valuable to offer the project materials to tutors new to the university as they had helped in developing the relationship with the students in the distance context. T8 had found them helpful as a new tutor too. The self-assessment sheets gave her a better idea about the students and their concerns in this context and helped her get to grips with completing the assignment feedback forms,

"it was something to grasp hold of, some support".

Individuals mentioned various insights gained and things they felt needed to be followed up. The need to share these was apparent, if not frequently articulated. For similar reasons, tutors were not asked directly about reflection on practice or what they felt they had learned during the year. Nevertheless, responses indicate that tutors were becoming more aware of learning processes themselves and were not threatened by this change. They were, however, constrained by student expectations, time and workload pressures which prevented them from devoting tutorial time to learning strategies. They probably confirmed students' concerns despite having a positive view of the project materials and their impact, perhaps thus discouraging some students from using them.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS

This investigation has brought together generic and language specific research in order to explore a number of questions about the nature and role of reflection in distance language learning. It examines the ways in which reflection underpins the relationship between the characteristics of the 'good' language learner, elements of the deep approach to learning and the notion of autonomy. It does so in the context of a group of learners largely absent from both avenues of research, that is, part-time, adult, distance learners. The Languages discipline also appears to be largely absent from research on the role of reflection in learning or on approaches to learning. Conclusions drawn from the findings are set out below for each research question. The limitations of the research are acknowledged. Further research issues and implications for practice are identified.

1. What do OU language learners actually do to develop their productive and receptive skills or to enhance their range of expression and grammatical knowledge?

Students in the sample, both users and non-users, worked through the course materials in the ways that the course teams had intended, which meant that they took little or no control of pedagogical activities. Nevertheless, in additional efforts to develop their language skills they actively deployed social, affective, memory and metacognitive strategies to develop their speaking, listening and reading in the target language and to enhance their range of expression and grammatical knowledge. They sought out practice opportunities which simultaneously provided scope for 'noticing' examples of language learned or useful phrases, enabled them to monitor their progress and enhanced their motivation. Researchers (Ramsden, 1992; Martin and Säljö, 1997, 2nd edn.) suggest that a focus on meaning makes study more satisfying and therefore students engage in more activity. Both users and non-users, regardless of level of study or previous qualifications in the language, created opportunities for communication or engagement

with the target language, taking control of functional activity and focusing on meaning.

Some non-users, however, deployed fewer 'active' strategies and demonstrated less control of functional activity, particularly in relation to speaking skills. They indicated a lack of confidence in their abilities. This may have reduced their readiness to take or create opportunities to use the language and therefore deprived them of motivating feedback as suggested by Yang (1999). Learner's beliefs about the decline of memory with age in relation to remembering vocabulary and grammar were also influential. They seem to have led students to either try out new strategies, or to reject them out of hand.

It was noticeable that active involvement ceased in the development of writing skills. This may not be surprising in view of students' expressed motivation to communicate with native speakers and interest in their culture. However it does not match with a course where 50% of assessment is for written outcomes. Lack of time was frequently cited (though time was found for extra activity related to the other skills) but more significant appeared to be the lack of personalised feedback, inability to work with a model answer different from their own and lack of confidence in their ability to self-assess. As a consequence, most writing activity, apart from assignments, was limited to sentence level exercises, copying words and phrases for reference and creating examples using these words and phrases in context.

The focus on meaningful communication and engagement with the target language disappeared once students began to talk about their approach to completing assignments. The focus switched to the word and sentence level and the need to include the right number of points of information. Students reported loss of spontaneity, particularly in spoken assignments, or lack of confidence in their ability to extract or remember the key points. They made greater use of cognitive strategies, note-taking, summarising, highlighting, recombining and particularly using the dictionary in a detailed examination of texts. For some, note-taking became virtual transcription of audio material. There was evidence that some students experienced considerable

difficulty in relating the spoken to the written forms of the language.

Students expressed anxiety and frustration due to the perceived lack of individual choice and control, the volume of content to be included, the time and word limits and the mode of delivery for oral assignments. In short, they described the factors which Biggs (1988) suggested would promote a surface approach. In the context of assessment, this may be seen as an 'achieving' approach by students keen to do well and get high marks.

However, the strategies adopted when not working on assignments and the level of expressed frustration seem to indicate that many learners in the sample, with a tendency to a deep approach, were being constrained into a surface approach (Ramsden 1992, 1997, 2nd edn.). The interview sample included students who had used the project materials and those who had not. This offered the opportunity to compare approaches. However, the strongest contrast identified was not between the approaches of students who used the project materials and those who did not, but rather it was between the approach to the development of language skills and the approach to assignments.

From this examination of what a sample of OU language learners actually do, it appears that the majority demonstrated characteristics of 'good' language learners as set out by Naiman *et al.* (1996, 2nd edn.), though a few were reluctant or unable to engage in much functional activity. The need for greater attention to management of affective factors was evident. These students also displayed elements of the deep approach identified by McCune and Entwistle (2000), although they implied, through their comments about limited personal input, that opportunities to create outlines and structures, and to question and use evidence critically, were severely limited by the nature of the assignment tasks. Similarly, although they displayed some of the ways in which autonomy is enhanced as described by Nunan (1996), they did not exercise pedagogical control by selecting content or learning tasks within the course and they felt severely constrained by the tightly defined assignment tasks. They indicated a lack of experience and confidence in self-assessment. It appears, therefore, that a learner demonstrating the characteristics of a 'good' language learner is likely to

display elements of a deep approach and of autonomy. However, a ‘good’ language learner does not necessarily engage in the critical questioning or determination of tasks and structures which characterise a deep and autonomous approach to learning unless the course, activities and assignments are designed to allow this to happen.

2. To what extent do OU language learners demonstrate the capacities of critical reflection and autonomy?

While talking about the ways in which they approached their language learning, students’ comments indicated a degree of self-awareness and a capacity to reflect critically on their learning. To varying extents and using different strategies, they provided evidence of their capacity to review, prioritise, plan and implement their learning, monitor and evaluate their own progress, which are the metacognitive strategies associated with the stages in Kolb’s learning cycle and with autonomous learning (Cotterall, 1995; Nunan, 1996). Students’ involvement in activating and producing the target language beyond the course activities has been noted, along with use of additional functional practice activities to monitor and evaluate progress, ‘notice’ and motivate themselves. Students were also able to identify strategies and conditions which helped them to develop their language skills.

Students gave most examples of self-awareness and reflection on their learning when talking about the skills of listening, writing and vocabulary development. The examples demonstrate both “reflexiveness” and some degree of “critical analysis” (Schön, 1983). Students reported learning to make a note of key points only, using the target language for note-taking, cutting down on use of the dictionary, planning to write and checking their work, all significant changes from their previous practices. They had become aware of how interest in a topic and personal relevance facilitated their learning and how these along with context, unusual sounds, written and visual images enhanced their vocabulary development. They knew of various memory strategies, but had not necessarily tried them out. They were aware of the influence and transfer of previous experience or the lack

of it, for example in making presentations or writing essays in their native language. They also pointed out the contrast and inconsistency in their behaviour between working to develop their language skills and working on assignments. However, some awareness came after the course and possibly only while reviewing experience during the interviews. This was particularly true of writing skills where students talked about how they should have tried to write more spontaneously, more often, as they had run into serious problems in the exams. Nevertheless, when asked what advice they would give new students on their course, students continued to emphasise the need to seek oral practice opportunities.

Although students reported changing the strategies they used and a realisation of what helped or hindered their learning, only those who had used the project materials were able to talk about specific priorities which they had identified and planned to work on during the course. They had gained more experience in self-assessment and made more systematic use of their tutor's feedback in reviewing their work. They were also able to be more specific about the techniques they had adopted, the progress they had made and what they had learned about their language learning. When explicitly asked about changes they had made to their approach, as opposed to incidental comments, they were able to give more specific responses than non-users. They appeared to have made a conscious choice of the language skills and aspects of the course which they focused on. The somewhat greater degree of critical reflection and autonomy among this group may have increased their sense of control over their work at least in terms of the workload, if not in the choice of assignment task. They were able to talk about the pleasure and satisfaction which new students might gain from the course in noticeable contrast to non-users.

3. To what extent do the language learning materials, activities and assessments in OU Language courses encourage reflection on learning and learner control?

The *LLGSG* promotes the characteristics of the 'good' language learner. It advises students to become aware of their own learning, examining their

Only in the final course for the diploma was the level of detail decreased. Careful specification of requirements is an attempt to minimise the ambiguity, which White (1999a) identified as a potential problem for distance learners, to take account of the lack of immediate opportunity for clarification in a distance context and to make the marking criteria transparent. Although all courses asked for a degree of personal input, and/or the arguing of a particular viewpoint, guidance was not always given about the balance between this aspect and the information required. A clearer indication of the balance and examples of how to combine the two aspects could help students to see how more creativity and personal input might be incorporated. If, as researchers suggest (e.g., Foster and Skehan, 1999; Van Patten, 1990, 1996, in Ellis, 2001a), students find it hard to focus on form and meaning at the same time and may prioritise one at the expense of the other, assessment which attempts to test both needs careful design. These findings support the students' view of assignment constraints and show that the nature of the tasks encouraged a surface approach.

4: What impact do the style and pace of OU Language courses and their assessment have on students' approaches to learning?

The students in this sample tended to a deep approach to study but adopted a surface approach to assignments due to the nature of the assignment tasks which encouraged a focus on word and sentence level detail and accuracy rather than on the meaning of the written or spoken communication. Apart from assignment task design, other factors are associated with a surface approach: excessive workload and assessment, perceived lack of student control in these areas (Biggs 1988); lack of background knowledge, lack of interest or relevance, lack of confidence in one's ideas and anxiety (Ramsden 1992). The impact on students' approaches to assignments of lack of choice, volume of content, time/word limits and anxiety caused by the mode of oral assessment have already been noted. When working through the course materials and activities some students also found themselves forced to adopt a surface/achieving approach at times. They expressed serious concerns about the volume of work and unrealistic pace. As the materials offered little or no choice over activities or support for prioritising,

many students felt anxious about their ability to keep up with the work and in some cases experienced considerable stress. 25% of the interview sample reported that, at times during the course, they found themselves forced to abandon some parts of the course materials and to focus on the assignments only. There was annoyance at not being able to pursue lines of interest or study in the way that they felt would most enhance their language learning. This contrasted with the general appreciation of the course materials, strong expressions of interest, identification with the culture and language and the efforts made to take functional control wherever possible. It appeared that the volume and pace of the course materials and the stress of keeping up, as well as the nature of the assignment tasks, forced 'would be' deep learners to adopt a surface/achieving approach at certain times during their study, much to their frustration.

White (1999a) indicated that low tolerance of ambiguity leads individuals to struggle with distance learning and ironically course teams try to reduce ambiguity by closely controlling course activities as well as assignments. They also have to cater for an unpredictable range of ability and experience on an open access programme. This may increase the volume of work as they attempt to address all potential needs. At the same time, lack of teaching about or invitations to prioritise, choose activities, self-assess and evaluate are likely to reinforce the external locus of control for some students, another condition identified by White as likely to cause learners to struggle in a distance context. A way of resolving these tensions is needed in order to increase student satisfaction levels. As users of the project materials appeared to have a somewhat more positive attitude to their courses, perhaps these materials may provide some indication as to how this could be achieved? At the same time, course design also needs to address missing elements of the deep approach, allowing students to create their own outlines and structures, encouraging questioning and a critical use of evidence and ideas to draw conclusions while remaining aware of the wider purpose of tasks. Language level may affect the extent to which this can be achieved. However, this may help to bridge the frustrating gap perceived by

some students between their level of performance in the language and their intellectual level.

5: Is it possible to develop the capacity for critical reflection, self-assessment and self-evaluation at a distance?

The project materials aimed to take students through the learning cycle to develop their use of the metacognitive strategies involved via a “supported process” (NCIHE, 1997). The findings indicate that it is possible to develop critical reflection, self-assessment and self-evaluation at a distance through such materials. Although most students demonstrated some capacity for critical reflection and autonomy (see questions 1 and 2), students who had used the materials appeared to have become more alert to the range of skills required for the assignment tasks, beyond grammatical accuracy, and which ones they needed to develop. They were more likely to identify priorities and talked about the way they had become more focused. The project materials gave them an opportunity to practise and gain confidence in self-assessment which in turn developed their relationship with their tutor. They made more active use of their tutor’s feedback, were able to evaluate their progress and identify gains made. The project materials appeared to have prompted changes in awareness, activity and approach for users, although it is possible that they might have arrived at these “metacognitive experiences” (White, 1999b: 38) without the project materials. Active involvement in their learning had indeed led some learners to question their attitudes and beliefs (Wenden, 1999: 441). The focus of these materials on assignments and the emphasis on written reflection were a barrier to other students. The findings confirm that students need time for reflection and acknowledgement that people may choose to do it in different ways. They also illustrate how students may resist reviewing existing study habits. They indicate that a framework such as the project materials can help to develop capacities for critical reflection, self-assessment and self-evaluation, or channel these capacities, but students need a clear rationale (Thorpe, 2000) and supported practice in course materials and tutorials. All aspects of the learning environment need to convey the same message or be “constructively aligned” (Biggs, 1999: 11). The need to develop strategies,

particularly the strategy of self-assessment, throughout language programmes and to give greater attention to the management of affective aspects of language learning was highlighted in a number of ways. These include the unease expressed about self-assessment, the difficulties which some students had with reviewing their taped performances, and the anxieties surrounding the return of an assignment caused, in part, by the gap between expectations and reality. Although the project materials or similar intervention may provide a means to develop critical reflection, self-assessment and self-evaluation, it is important to remain aware that this approach is not necessarily the only route to effective language learning and that the learner is the ultimate judge according to their personal requirements.

6. In a distance context, how do tutor expectations and approaches influence learners' use of the project materials and development of capacities for conscious reflection and decision-making?

The findings from the tutor interviews indicated that they were positive about the project materials, particularly the self-assessment sheets. Low take-up of the project materials caused great disappointment. In the context of low levels of contact from their students, and irregular tutorial attendance, tutors welcomed an additional means to promote dialogue around the assignments, the one assured point of contact with every student. This dialogue would not only enable them to better support their students, but would also give the reassurance which they appeared to need about their feedback, despite their experience in distance language teaching. Although tutors regularly seek students' feedback about tutorials, it seems to be rarer to seek their views on assignment feedback. A number of tutors were very alert to the significance of the affective side of language learning at a distance, particularly the return of assignments. They saw the self-assessment sheets as a way for students to channel feelings. Increased dialogue appears to be important in managing affective aspects for both parties.

Tutors indicated that they had primarily seen tutorials as opportunities to enhance students' language performance, but had not previously highlighted the development of language learning strategies. As a result of participating in the project, some tutors were now incorporating awareness raising activities and strategies for skills development into their tutorials and their assignment feedback. This indicates a willingness to change and to reflect on practice. Others felt they had been doing this anyway or their students simply didn't need it. It is not possible to comment on the degree to which tutors were making these strategies explicit to students. The appropriate strategy development for different language levels also needs clarification.

Despite a positive view of the project materials and willingness to review their practice, tutors made little or no use of the skills audit, self-assessment or review sheets in their teaching and appeared to do relatively little to foster conscious decision-making. They remarked on the difficulties which some students had with self-assessment yet only one tutor included practice in her tutorial programme. Tutors gave out the project materials, explained them and encouraged students to use them. In view of the lack of explicit teaching and practice for self-assessment, self-evaluation and reflection in the course materials, this probably made too many assumptions about students' capacities. Tutorials could offer an opportunity to remedy the situation in the short term and guidelines for using the project materials need revision in this respect. Tutors may need further staff development and appropriate resources to put this into practice.

In addition to any assumptions about students' capacities for self-assessment, self-evaluation and reflection, tutors' experience led them to be very concerned not to overburden students at the start of the year, when they are already overwhelmed by the volume of materials and correspondence which they receive. Tutors are also very aware of the number of other matters to deal with in early tutorials and of students' expectations that tutorials will be in the target language and focus on language performance. They have also seen students struggle with the workload and worry about adding to this. Therefore, their positive view of the project materials was countered by these concerns which limited the extent to which they devoted

time to them. This probably reinforced the students' views about an 'optional extra' and may have discouraged use of the project materials by some students. The findings from both tutor and student interviews confirm the need to incorporate such frameworks, materials and activities into the course materials with a clear rationale. Tutors cannot be responsible for achieving "constructive alignment" on their own.

Limitations of the research

These conclusions have to be viewed within the limitations of the research. It was carried out with a small sample within one region of the OU. There are issues surrounding data collection via retrospective verbal reports. The students and tutors involved were self-selected. The interviews were carried out in a way that attempted to build on information given on the questionnaires and began from individual priorities or concerns. This meant that some topics did not arise naturally and views were not elicited on them consistently. The experience of distance language study was explored with users of the project materials and non-users. Although some differences have been identified, it is possible that those attracted to using the project materials were already 'good' language learners reflecting on their learning and deploying a range of active strategies successfully to enhance their skills. They saw these materials as a further possibility.

The research relied on the commitment of tutors to introduce and support use of the project materials. The approach and activity of tutors varied considerably. Although the project aimed to foster conscious decision-making, and students were encouraged to decide which areas to work on, the materials did not emphasise or support the need to choose appropriate strategies to achieve goals. The materials need to be amended to take account of this and tutor support for this area of choice needs to be developed. Interviews did not explicitly explore students' decision-making processes. In the same way, interviews with tutors did not explicitly focus on their own previous experience of working through the learning cycle or how they supported reflection and decision-making. In each case, the research relies on interpretation of indirect evidence.

The majority of these limitations have been addressed in Chapters 3 and 4. Although, with hindsight, some changes might have been made, I believe that the conclusions represent an important contribution to exploration of the relationship between theories of learning and language learning, to understanding distance language learning, and to practice within the OU while raising a number of further research issues.

Contribution to understanding of the theory and practice of distance language learning

This research identifies the strategies which part-time adult distance language learners deploy in their efforts to develop their language skills and tackle the demands of their studies. These learners are under-represented in language learning research which is frequently based on experimental groups in classroom settings. The findings provide clear evidence of what OU language students do, which has been only anecdotal until now. They confirm the importance of metacognitive, social and affective strategies and highlight the role of functional practice beyond the course in self-assessment, self-evaluation, 'noticing' and motivation rather than simply as language practice. The research identifies a disjunction between such behaviour and the approach to assignment tasks. Functional practice represents the learner's engagement with the community of target language speakers. The research suggests that course designers should capitalise more on the roles fulfilled by functional practice and pay more attention to developing capacities for critical reflection, decision-making, self-assessment and self-evaluation. The exploration of the relationship between the 'good' language learner, a deep approach to learning and autonomy suggests that all aspects of the 'good' language learner should be developed. Language teachers and researchers, however, have given greater emphasis to active involvement and 'risk-taking' than to the management of affective aspects of language learning. This study highlights the significance of affective factors for both students and tutors in a distance context and suggests that a better balance is needed. It also suggests that the notion of the 'good' language learner might be adjusted to include a more critical, questioning approach.

Further research issues.

The findings indicate the need for further research in a number of areas.

Research in language learning

- In what ways can a deep approach to learning be encouraged at beginner or intermediate levels of language learning? What do elements of a deep approach look like at different levels of performance? Such descriptions are currently being developed in a range of disciplines, but not in language learning. To what extent is this approach compatible with early mastery of structures and vocabulary and development of linguistic accuracy, or is this a necessary element of a deep approach to language learning (Ramsden, 1992: 49)? As noted in the literature review, language teachers have long been concerned with balancing fluency with accuracy, meaning with form. This research could establish the feasibility of designing language course and assignment tasks which require more meaning-focused, critical responses at the same time as allowing for the development and testing of accuracy and comprehension. It could also explore the extent to which learners can attend to both at once (Foster and Skehan, 1999; Van Patten, 1990, 1996, in Ellis, 2001a).
- Is it possible to agree a progression for language learning strategy development at different levels of language competence? This could enable a coherent approach to incorporating such development into course, assignment design and teaching. Some researchers suggest that more advanced learners demonstrate use of more strategies (Oxford and Ehrman, 1995). The data from this study could be re-analysed from this perspective. They do not seem to support this proposition at present. Strength of motivation appeared to be more important. However, more information would be needed about students' language learning experience in general rather than their proficiency in the specific target language.

Research in a distance learning context

- What helps students to manage the affective aspects of language learning at a distance?
- What would encourage students to undertake more spontaneous writing in the target language and include this in their functional practice activity? Does the increasing use of email offer an opportunity? Is it correct to assume that more practice in writing improves writing skills?

Research in the OU context

- The findings indicate a need to examine whether language assignments allow students to build on their experience of the course work and previous assignments. Do they reflect progressive skills and strategy as well as language development?
- To what extent are tutors engaged in strategy development and are they making this explicit in tutorials or in their feedback? Are they encouraging decision-making? This could involve tutorial observations and examination of assignment feedback.
- Students receive both written and verbal feedback on oral assignments. Research is needed on the impact of different styles and combinations of feedback and what students find helpful. This could also include ways of fostering greater dialogue between students and tutors about assignment feedback as reported in other studies (e.g., George, 2001).

Implications for practice

The findings suggest a number of implications for course teams, regional staff and tutors if “constructive alignment” of the learning and teaching environment is to be achieved for the development of self-aware, independent learners with a capacity for critical reflection.

with affective factors for themselves and students. Overt modelling of the learning cycle in such staff development could help tutors to become fully engaged with the ideas rather than perhaps simply accepting them on a purely intellectual level.

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APPENDIX 1

LANGUAGE LEARNING SKILLS MATERIALS

LLS 1 Skills Audit

LLS2 Skills Audit, 60 point courses (not included)

LLS3 Self-Assessment sheet

LLS4 10 Tips on what to do when the assignment is returned, German version

LLS5b-g Skills Sheets (a and c not included, French and Spanish versions of b)

Tutor Guidelines

LLS6 Tutor record sheet for distribution of materials

Wie sicher sind Sie im:	What do you want to work on? Woran möchten Sie arbeiten? ✓ 2 or 3 priorities and note how you plan to work on them ✓ an zwei oder drei Prioritäten und schreiben sie daneben, wie Sie daran arbeiten werden	How confident are you in:
Schreiben		Writing
Strukturieren Ihrer Ideen in einen klaren Plan für Ihr Schreiben		a) Structuring your ideas into a clear plan for your writing
Benutzen eines Sprachstils, der den Zuhörern angemessen ist (wie in der Aufgabe definiert, z.B. förmliche oder nicht förmliche Sprache)		b) Using language style appropriate to your "audience" (as defined in the task) eg formal or informal language
korrekten Schreiben und Rechtschreiben, eingeschlossen Umlaute und Nachsehen von korrekter Schreibweise im Wörterbuch		c) Writing and spelling accurately – ie including accents, checking spellings in a dictionary
Benutzen von Informationen aus dem Quellenmaterial in Ihren eigenen Worten, nicht ganze Absätze abschreiben		d) Including information from source material in your own words, not copying sections of it
Benutzen kultureller Informationen/Schauplätze, die dem Land, wo die Sprache gesprochen wird und die Aufgabe spielt, angemessen sind		e) Using cultural information/settings appropriate to the country where the language is spoken and the task set
Fertigkeiten, die für Sprechen <u>und</u> Schreiben gelten		Skills common to Speaking and Writing
Anwenden einer Bandbreite angemessener Wörter, Ausdrücke und Strukturen aus dem Kurs, so dass Ihre Präsentation Abwechslung hat		a) Using a range of appropriate words, phrases and structures from the course so your presentation has variety
Benutzen von Verbindungsausdrücken und – wörtern, z.B. erstens, zweitens, auf der einen Seite etc. Zusammenfassend ... oder meiner Meinung nach, so dass Ihrem Publikum Ihre Absicht und die Zielrichtung ihrer Argumente klar ist		b) Using linking phrases and words, eg firstly, secondly, on the one hand, etc To conclude .. or in my opinion , so that your audience is aware of your intentions and the directions of your argument
Innerhalb der vorgegebenen Vorbereitungs – und Sprechzeit Bleiben		c) Keeping within the suggested preparation and prescribed delivery times
Auswählen angemessener Wörter/Ausdrücke aus einem Wörterbuch		d) Selecting appropriate words/phrases from a dictionary
korrekten Anwenden grammatischer strukturen, z.B. Zeiten, Satzordnung, Angleichungen, etc		e) Using grammatical structures accurately eg, tenses, word order, agreements, etc
Analysieren des Materials/der Ideen (z.B. Diskutieren und Auswerten verschiedener Gesichtspunkte, und dann zu einer eigenen Schlussfolgerung gelangen		f) Analysing the material/ideas (eg discussing and evaluating points of view and coming to your own conclusions)

LLS3

Learning from Assignments

Von "Assignments" lernen

TMA – Self Assessment

TMA – Selbstbewertungsformular

Name: _____

TMA No: _____

Please fill in Part 1 and send it with your TMA

Bitte füllen Sie Teil 1 aus und schicken Sie dieses Blatt zusammen mit Ihrem TMA ein

Fill in Part 2 when it is returned with your TMA

Füllen Sie Teil 2 aus, sobald Sie Ihr TMA zurückerhalten haben

Part 1 (Teil 1)

1. The skills which I have chosen to work on for this assignment (my priorities):
Die Fertigkeiten, an denen ich diesmal gearbeitet habe (meine Prioritäten):

2. Things I think I have done well in the Speaking Test and why:
Was ich beim Sprechen gut gemacht habe, und warum

3. Things which I think I had difficulty with in the Speaking Test and why.
Was ich beim Sprechen schwierig fand und warum:

4. Things which I think I have done well in the Writing Test and why:
Was ich beim Schreiben gut gemacht habe und warum:

5. Things which I had difficulty with in the Writing Test and why:
Was ich beim Schreiben schwierig fand und warum:

6. Other Comments/Questions:
Sonstige Kommentare/Fragen:

LLS4

Zehn Tips für wenn Sie Ihr TMA Zurückbekommen (um so viel wie möglich von der korrigierten Arbeit zu profitieren)

1. Wahrscheinlich werden Sie sich zuerst die Noten ansehen! Das ist verständlich, aber bitte lesen Sie auch meine Bemerkungen sehr genau und gehen Sie darauf ein, in dem Sie festlegen, wie Sie sich verbessern können.
2. Geben Sie sich 20-30 Minuten Zeit, um die korrigierte Arbeit, das PT3-Formular und das Selbstbewertungsblatt zu lesen.
3. Lesen sie alle Teile Ihrer korrigierten Arbeit sorgfältig durch und sehen Sie sich die Verbesserungen und Bemerkungen an. Hören Sie Ihre Sprechübung noch einmal an und hören Sie dann meinen Kommentar dazu, der direkt folgt. Üben Sie, indem Sie Beispiele, die ich Ihnen aufgenommen habe, wiederholen.
4. Belohnen Sie sich für jeden Haken pro Wort/Ausdruck/Abschnitt (so wie Geld in der Bank ist dies Sprache auf ihrem Konto!)
5. Haben Sie vermeidbare Fehler gemacht? Sehen Sie sich diese Fehler gut an, und wiederholen Sie sie nicht!
6. Listen Sie die Fehler auf, die durch neue, unbekannte Sprache entstanden sind – darauf sollten Sie sich konzentrieren. Schlagen Sie alle Querverweise zum Kurs – oder Grammatikbuch nach, die ich erwähnt habe. Legen Sie fest, was Sie für das nächste TMA lernen/wiederholen müssen. Welche Fertigkeiten brauchen Sie dafür?
7. Werten Sie Ihre Leistung im Zusammenhang mit dem Selbstbewertungsformular aus. Wie genau können Sie Ihre Leistung beurteilen? Stärken und Schwächen? Vielleicht können Sie wiederholen, was Sie schon geschrieben haben, oder das „Sprechen“ noch einmal aufnehmen, wenn Sie meinen Rat/meine Vorschläge durchgearbeitet haben.
8. Fassen Sie meine Bemerkungen in Teil 2 des Selbstbewertungsformulars zusammen und schreiben Sie alles auf, was Ihnen unklar ist. Dann dürfen Sie sich gerne mit mir in Verbindung setzen.
9. Jetzt sollten Sie zwei oder drei Dinge auswählen, auf die Sie sich konzentrieren, um Ihr nächstes TMA (oder die Abschlussprüfung) zu verbessern.
10. Seien Sie realistisch mit den Zielen, die Sie sich setzen. Wählen Sie nicht zu viele. Entscheiden Sie, wie Sie sie erreichen wollen. Schreiben Sie es auf und beziehen Sie sich darauf, wenn Sie sich mit dem nächsten TMA beschäftigen.

Developing your Reading Skills

- Are you: A. Reading for an assignment or exercise?
 B. Reading for pleasure?

A. Reading for an assignment

- Look carefully at the question or task. It's easier to read the text if you have a focus for your reading.
- Use context clues – for example what is the title? Are there any pictures that can give you some clues? Can you make a **guess** about the content or story line from these? **Skim** through the passage (leave the dictionary alone for now). Then **scan** the passage to extract specific information. Try to distinguish between the core of a sentence ie main subject/verb/object and the “padding”. Try to guess words from their formation, their prefixes or suffixes or their similarity to English words. Read through the passage again and **highlight** any real problems.
- Before you finally reach for the dictionary, check these points:
 - Is it a noun? (all nouns have capital letters). Is it a compound noun, ie two or more nouns put together? If so, you may find it easier to split it up.
 - Is it a verb? Does it have a familiar prefix (eg **ge-**, **ver-**, **be-**, **ent-**)? Then look up the infinitive (adding **-en** to the verb). It could be the imperfect tense of a strong verb, so look for it in your list of verbs.
 - Use **grammatical cues** for understanding and prediction. Remember that German sentences can be written “back to front”. Look at this example: **Den Mann sucht die Polizei**. Don't rush to conclusions. Find the nominative (the subject of the sentence). Can **den Mann** be the subject of the sentence? Is **den** nominative? No! So it's the police who are looking for the man. Of course if it were **Die Frau sucht die Polizei**, then you would have to look for other contextual clues!

How about **Dem Hund gab der Junge einen Knochen**? Did the dog give the bone or the boy? Look at **Dem** – it can only be dative – to the dog – so there you have it : **the boy gave (to) the dog a bone**.

B. Reading for Pleasure

- If time allows, read authentic texts. Treat yourself to a newspaper or magazine.
- Use all available clues to understand the message – pictures/titles/sub-titles.
- Use what you have read to produce spoken or written language. For example, you could summarise what you have read in note form or tell someone else (or your tape recorder!) what you have read.
- Make it a pleasure, and don't feel you have to look up every single word!

You will find that *The Language Learner's Good Study Guide* pages 23 and 24 expands on these ideas

LLS5d

Developing your Writing Skills

General Points

- The secret of writing in a foreign language is **not to** formulate it in your mother tongue so that writing becomes translation! Not easy, but thinking in the foreign language is worth cultivating as a vital skill.
- Writing is a process, not something that is done in one go. It involves various stages:
 - ❖ pre-writing
 - jot down ideas, known phrases, useful vocabulary
 - list main points under paragraph headings
 - ❖ drafting
 - make a draft of the work
 - ❖ editing
 - has everything that is required been included, or is there too much?
 - ❖ final version
 - refine ideas, refine language (but don't be too experimental – base your writing on phrases and vocabulary you can use with confidence)
 - ❖ have a break
 - leave it for a while, then come back and read it through again
 - ❖ checking
 - check spelling; genders; endings/agreements such as adjectives to noun or verbs conjugated with **avoir** or **être**; **haben** or **sein**; **ser** or **estar**; consistency, eg **Du** or **Sie**, **tu** or **vous**; **tú** or **usted**; the accents or umlauts; number of words; double spaced?

Writing Assignments

These are assessed for content, structure and development, accuracy and range of expression.

- Read the rubric or instructions for the Writing Task carefully to find out exactly what is required. Plan a paragraph to cover each point.
- Keep to within 20 words either side of the number suggested. Together points 1 and 2 will help you maximise your **content** marks.
- **Accuracy** is a skill which will improve with care and practice. The **checking** stage is important here. You may find it useful to go through what you have written several times, looking at specific points first, eg adjective agreements; then verb endings; then accents etc, rather than try to cover everything at once. If in doubt, use your dictionary.

- **Range of Expression** will depend on the vocabulary and phrases which you have made your own as the course progresses. Use words and phrases from the Units you have studied in order to write about Course Topics.
- In addition to topic specific vocabulary, be systematic in learning and using link words and phrases (regularly highlighted in the summaries/key points/revision sections in the Courses). This will give **structure** to your written work, a direction and flow which helps the reader to follow the **development** of your ideas.
- Writing involves a number of skills, including spelling, grammar, idiom and register (using the right language for the right audience!) It will take time to master some or all of these but progress is very satisfying. Your returned TMAs will give you feedback. Act on your Tutor's advice, including the remarks on the PT3. Decide which specific aspects of your Writing Skills to work on and "declare" these on the Self Assessment Sheet you send off with your next TMA.
- Everyone's handwriting differs in its legibility. A word-processed TMA will certainly be legible, there are some other advantages ...

- ❖ Typing your work as you do it gives you more 'thinking time' about what to write
- ❖ You can draft and re-draft/revise and re-order paragraphs easily and correct your work without trace
- ❖ You can improve spelling and positioning of accents/umlauts
- ❖ Counting the words is easy
- ❖ You can easily correct/revise your original when you get feedback from your tutor and learn more in the process

but there are a couple of disadvantages to watch out for ...

- ❖ You may forget to add the accents/umlauts if it is a separate operation
- ❖ Once it's in print you may be tempted to leave it as it "looks good"!

The Language Learner's Good Study Guide, pages 27 and 28, has more advice and ideas on Writing. Pages 38 and 39 give advice on *Using a Dictionary*.

LLS5f

Developing your Listening Skills

- Listening skills are needed for a variety of situations, eg listening to the radio (which you can't normally play back), spoken language on tapes/CDs and videos (play-back available), listening to native speakers in real life situations, listening to other students, listening to the tutor. A conversation always consists of *listening* as well as *speaking*. Listening effectively helps you respond appropriately.
- Be aware of what your aims are. In general conversation you might listen out for the gist, whereas you need to listen to specific answers when asking questions about a bus timetable. It's usually easier to listen for the answer to a specific question as you have some expectation already about the sort of answer you may get. Try to learn a variety of phrases in the target language so that you can ask the speaker to repeat, speak more slowly, explain, define, etc.
- When listening to recorded material, gather as much information as possible from the context and the introduction, so that you know what kind of text to expect. Listen to the whole text first, then listen to it in shorter sections.
- For most purposes it is not necessary to understand every single word. In fact, if you try to do that, you might lose valuable time, and, in the case of non-recorded material, the conversation will have moved on while you are still trying to make sense of the previous utterance. It is essential to decide *what you are listening out for*, general gist or detailed information? Have a paper and pen ready to note key words if you find that helps you. Do not make written notes if you find it takes up too much time and distracts you from listening.
- You might want to repeat phrases from recorded material, then rewind the tape and listen again. Be aware though that authentic language from native speakers, contains hesitations, repetitions and mistakes and that speakers might have accents which differ from standard pronunciation. (In such cases you might find the transcript useful, but always try to listen without first!).
- Listen to the target language as much as possible. It is useful to listen to the course material, but there are lots of other things you could listen to: eg, the radio, foreign films, even your French/German/Spanish neighbour. You may be able to listen to some French/German/Spanish whilst you are doing some routine tasks. Listening to something amusing in the target language while stuck in a traffic jam will entertain you at the same time as improving your language!

Refer to *The Language Learner's Good Study Guide*, especially pages 20-23, for more ideas

LLS5g

Learning/Extending your Vocabulary

- Find out what kind of learner you are in order to choose a method which works for you. For example, think about how you memorise best: do you use your visual or audio-memory, practise drill – type exercises or do you learn words through association? There is no right or wrong way of doing it, but most successful learners adopt or plan a system.
- For what purpose do you need your vocabulary? Distinguish between *active use* (in speaking and writing) and *passive use* or recognition (in listening and reading). Your passive store of vocabulary will be larger than your active one, since less effort is involved in acquiring it. In addition you may want to distinguish between *vocabulary you need for your course and assignments*, and *vocabulary relevant to you personally*. Ideally the two will overlap!
- Categorise vocabulary according to your needs, eg topics like transport or travel, or aspects of grammar like prepositions, irregular verbs, etc.
- For active vocabulary, it is useful to learn phrases rather than individual words. You are more likely to remember and use words which are embedded in a sentence, especially if it is a sentence which is relevant to you personally.
- Define your goals : learn a certain number of phrases or words associated with a topic per day or study session, and try to stick to your plan.
- **How** do you memorise? If you are a visual learner, you could copy out lists of phrases several times, covering up one language at a time until you can easily do translations from English into the target language and vice-versa. It might help to say your phrases out loud as you write them down. Alternatively you could write individual words or phrases on separate cards so that you can mix the order to test yourself, or leave them in prominent places around the house so that you look at them regularly! If you are very good at audio learning, you might want to only concentrate on the oral practice of vocabulary. You could record English/target language vocabulary onto a tape and pause the tape for you to fill in the translation. If working with a partner, take turns checking each other.
- Increase your vocabulary by exposing yourself to the target language as much as possible. Listen to the radio, watch the television, read a novel or listen to tapes (don't forget your car cassette player!) in the target language. You don't have to be in "serious learning mode" to pick up new vocabulary, in fact it helps to be relaxed and have some fun!
- Don't forget to learn the definite article [*der/die/das, le/la or el/la*] as you learn a noun. Learn the rules for genders of nouns too (there are some!) and look out for patterns in word formation.
- Look out for similarity of words between languages but beware of "false friends" – words which look or sound the same, but actually have different meanings in the different languages. You might want to keep a special note of these when you come across them.
- Refer to *The Language Learner's Good Study Guide*, pages 24 and 29-31 for more suggestions.

Language Learning Skills

Guidance for tutors on introducing and supporting the process and using the materials

Introducing the process

In your introductory letter/at the first tutorial/in any follow up letter to the first tutorial:

Suggest students will get more out of the course if they

- think about their strengths and weakness (everybody has some idea about this), which areas they probably need to focus their efforts on in order to improve and therefore which aspects of the course they need to pay more attention to. Most courses have summaries of what each book will cover. Students can then decide to move more quickly over things that are familiar or which they feel more confident about.
This could help them when there is a lot of work to cover, many students find they are short of time. Some time spent on this could save time elsewhere, be time well-spent.
- think about how they actually learn/practise language and what works best for them. This might apply to when/how often they study as well as to the methods/techniques they use eg to remember new vocabulary or practise speaking skills. They could take the opportunity to find out what others do, look in the study guide, talk to you etc and try out different approaches to see what works for them.

Be aware that many students may have come across this approach last year, or in the Learning Skills Workshops at the start of this year. Check this out/acknowledge it.

You are proposing a way of working which should help them get the best from their studies. It could also help them get better scores for their assignments! It will also enable you to give them more support specifically in the areas they want to improve on.

[This approach might also be something you could suggest/refer students to if they contact you because they are under pressure and getting behind.]

Students might also discuss their skills and how they work on them in self-help groups?]

**Try an activity in the first or second tutorial along these lines:
(Use the target language or English, depending on the level, point in the tutorial etc.)**

- As an ice-breaker, or later in the tutorial, ask students to go around and talk to each other about how they study, eg when, where, how often, how they learn vocab, grammar, practise speaking or pronunciation. (Perhaps a variation on "find someone who ..."). Or divide them into groups to discuss this and then report back.
- In this plenary, you could draw attention to the study guide and perhaps feed in one or two other suggestions. Let students know that if they have specific areas they want to focus on you could let them have some suggestions (ie the **SKILLS SHEETS [Codes LLS5a -g]**)
- You could introduce the **AUDIT SHEET [LLS1 or 2 F, G or S]** at this stage and explain it covers the skills they will need for their speaking and listening assignments. Refer to the points above about the need to focus and the benefits of being explicit about this and having a record rather than just 'making a mental note'.
- Get the group to brainstorm some suggestions for how to work on/improve some of the skills in the audit.
- Give students an opportunity to begin to think about their own strengths and weaknesses and fill in the audit.

N.B. This audit is for **THEM**. It is theirs and not something they need to send or show you. They keep it for reference. However, they may want to discuss it with you or seek your advice/opinion on their priorities, particularly if they aren't used to thinking about their own performance in this way. Working through the audit in a tutorial can help. Let students know you are ready to talk it over, particularly if you send it to students who can't make the tutorial.

- They can tell you what their priorities are and how they feel they have done on the **SELF ASSESSMENT SHEET [LLS 3 F, G or S]**. They need to fill in part 1 and send it to you with their TMA. (When you return the TMA, you will need to remember to enclose a fresh copy of this sheet so that they can use it with the next assignment.)
Part 1 will enable you to give appropriate feedback and advice to help them with their priorities. Point out that they should fill in part 2 when they get the TMA back. Again it is better to give some conscious thought to it rather than just making 'mental notes' and putting it in writing does just that. Time spent on this could help to save time in the future. They then need to keep it handy to refer to as they work towards the next assignment.

This 'habit' ie. thinking about your performance, using feedback, deciding new priorities, what to do about them and then getting on and doing it, has been shown to make learning more effective and can be applied to any subject.

Timing the Introduction of the process

If the first TMA is some time after the start of the course (as it is in Level 1 courses), you might prefer to introduce the ideas at the first tutorial and the audit etc at the second tutorial (bearing in mind that more people tend to attend the first and therefore there may be more to follow up afterwards).

If you teach a second level course where the first assignment is fairly early, you might prefer to introduce it all at the first tutorial or, alternatively, discuss the ideas, but just give the self assessment sheet at that point and follow up with work on the audit etc at the tutorial after the first assignment. (Some Level 2 tutors who used the materials in 1999 have suggested sending the audit out with the introductory letter so that students can think about it before the first tutorial).

For students who couldn't come to the tutorial:

- it may be best to write to these students with an outline of what was covered and copies of any handouts, include an explanation of the points above, an audit sheet and a self assessment sheet. Suggest they phone you to talk it over if they want to.
- if you prefer to phone students who don't come, or they get in touch with you, talk them through these ideas. Ask them where they feel their strengths/weaknesses lie and the sort of things they might do to work on them/ how to focus their use of course materials. Make some suggestions if appropriate. Then send a copy of the audit and a self assessment sheet. Suggest they contact you again when these arrive to talk them over if they want to.

Distributing the 10 tips and Skills Sheets :

- Send a copy of the 10 tips [LLS4] with the student's first assignment when you return it via the assignment handling office. They forward everything to the student. (Don't forget that at some points in the year you can use this route for sending tutorial details, eg what's coming or what's happened, but allow a week for them to arrive.)
NB These tips can be sent to all students, whether or not they have sent you a self assessment form!

- If you feel a student could benefit from further advice on a particular skill area or has identified it as a priority, **send a copy of the appropriate skill sheet (LLS 5a-g) with the TMA when you return it.** You can do this whether or not the student appears to be using the process. Don't be tempted to send a copy of all the sheets to all your students 'just in case'. The volume of material could be very off-putting and defeats the object of getting them to focus on priorities! Be selective!
- Some tutors have found it worthwhile to focus on one or two techniques from a skills sheet in a tutorial, and then give the sheet as a handout afterwards. This might give students a way of trying out strategies for remembering vocab or making notes that they might not have tried otherwise.

When you mark the TMAs

- If a student has sent you a self assessment sheet, **make sure you refer to it explicitly on the PT3 or by a brief response on the sheet if it seems appropriate.**
Students who feel you have taken no notice of what they have sent won't bother again! It is very useful to students to know that you agree with them about their performance or very encouraging if you are able to say they are worrying needlessly. It is obviously crucial that you let them know if they appear to be focussing on something where the problems are minor but something else needs much more attention, particularly if you can show them why.
- Your comments on the PT3 should be enough to remind you of what the student's priorities were when you come to the next assignment. If you feel you need to keep more information, you will need to decide how you will record it. **The self-assessment sheet should be returned with the TMA so that the student can complete part 2.**
- The self assessment sheets are bilingual. Many students indicated a preference for this, though most tend to write in English. This is fine, as the process is for them to use as best suits them, but some students on the higher level courses may choose the target language and some may develop that use as the year goes on.

Supporting the process through the year, maintaining momentum :

- If a student hasn't used a self-assessment sheet you could send one back with the assignment to use with the next one and a note along the lines of "I'm finding that students who are making use of these sheets are deriving enormous benefits because I can give them more focussed help".
- Remember to send a new sheet back with each assignment.
- Mention during the year, on PT3, or at tutorials, how much you appreciate their feedback, how useful it is in helping you to give tailor-made response and increasing dialogue. Refer to the self-assessment sheets as if they are 'normal' when you discuss feedback after TMAs in tutorials.

- Remind students that it can help them save time when under pressure, by helping them to prioritise.
- Try some more skill based activities in tutorials/day schools which give students the chance to try different techniques eg. for pronunciation practice, for organising notes to speak from for a presentation to the group (as preparation for TMAs on tape), for taking notes in the target language while listening to a cassette of reading or for checking written work, ways of paraphrasing/ summarising stimulus material to avoid “plagiarism” and share experience. These might be particularly relevant if students have just done a TMA and you have noted skills which quite a few students are working on or where they seem to need some advice.

Evaluation :

In order to assess the impact of the process and the materials it is important to keep some records. Memory can play tricks especially if quite a few of your students become involved! Please would you keep a brief note of

- how you introduced the process to your students
- how many students appear to be using it
- any activities which you use to support the process during the year
- any other observations you have about the process, materials, reactions to them.

[You can use sheet LLS6 to record what you have given students and when and what you have received from them]

And Finally, some quotable quotes.....

You might find some of these student quotes useful:

“practising is more useful than trying to learn things by heart”

“it does focus your mind, actually having to write it down, it reinforces it”

“looking back, I can see that identifying priorities would have saved time”

“It’s not time- consuming, it’s quite an essential part of the course really. It doesn’t take long, perhaps half an hour to an hour, but it’s time well spent and could help in the long run.”

“I can’t really see that it takes too much time. You have to do it any way, it’s just putting thoughts down on paper that you should be thinking anyway!”

“ I didn’t think it took a lot of time, especially if it becomes part of your routine. It was helpful. I felt that I was working on things that needed to be worked on and not wasting time, so it was time well spent.”

“You get back what you put in in terms of time. It makes you sit down and consciously analyse what you are doing. For the time it took, which wasn’t that long, you got your money’s worth from it.”

“ It actually made me sit down and think, now what has the tutor said about me this time? It really brought it home more consciously, even positive things, for example, where I thought it was quite good and she did too, great!”

“Of course it takes some time, but it save time overall through sharper focus.”

LLS6

Items given/sent to students + dates

Student	Audit Sheet		Self-Assessment Sheet	10 Tips	Skills Sheets LLS5							Self-Assessment Sheets received from student
	LLS1	LLS2	LLS3	LLS4	a	b	c	d	e	f	g	

APPENDIX 2

THE OPEN UNIVERSITY IN THE SOUTH

This is one of 13 OU regions and covers the following area:

Buckinghamshire

Oxfordshire

Berkshire

Hampshire

Part of Wiltshire

The Isle of Wight

Dorset

The Channel Islands

APPENDIX 3**OPEN UNIVERSITY LANGUAGE COURSES AND TUTORIAL GROUPS IN THE SOUTH REGION IN 1999****Courses available for study in 1999: language, level and credit rating**

French	Level 1	L120	Ouverture	30 points
French *	Level 2	L221	Envol	30 points
French *	Level 2	L210	Mises au point	60 points
German	Level 1	L130	Auftakt	30 points
German *	Level 2	L230	Motive	30 points
German *	Level 2	L213	Variationen	60 points
Spanish	Level 1	L140	En Rumbo	30 points

* courses with a compulsory one week residential school

In 1999 students needed to study all three courses in French or German and gain 120 points to be awarded the Diploma in French or German. Students could gain up to 60 points by credit transfer or APEL. The Spanish Diploma introduced in 2000 comprises 120 points, 60 points at Level 2 and 60 points at Level 3. The Level 1 Spanish course was not therefore part of this Diploma.

Tutorial Groups in the South Region in 1999

Course	Groups in 1999	Tuition hours	Tutor/St. Ratio
L120	10	18	1:25
L221	5	18	1:25
L210	6	21	1:15
L130	4	18	1:25
L230	3	18	1:25
L213	4	21	1:15
L140	6	18	1:25
Total	38		

Individual tutors working in the South Region in 1999 : 32

French 17 German 10 Spanish 6

(One tutor taught both French and German)

APPENDIX 4

NATURE OF ASSESSMENT FOR OU LANGUAGE COURSES IN 1999

All courses had a strategy of integrated assessment. Students were given text or audio materials as a stimulus from which to prepare a response to a task, either a piece of writing or a spoken presentation on audio-cassette. Students were expected to draw on appropriate course materials in terms of content, grammar and range of expression, but to express ideas in their own words. They were expected to speak 'spontaneously' in oral assignments, i.e. using notes rather than reading from a prepared script. Each assignment consisted of a written and a spoken task.

The length of written assignments ranged from up to 250 words at Level 1 to 400 words for Level 2 30 point courses, and a 3,000 word extended essay as the final assignment for Level 2 60 point courses. Oral assignments ranged from 1 minute at the beginning of Level 1 courses to 5 minutes at the end of the 60 point Level 2 course.

30 point courses had 4 tutor marked assignments, 60 point courses had 7. The final assignment in these courses was an extended essay on one of a choice of topics, plus an oral presentation on how the student approached this work and what they felt they gained from it (L210), or expanding on a particular aspect of the topic (L213).

Level 1 courses did not have a final examination. They had an End of Course Assessment (ECA) consisting of a written assignment in the same format as others during the year, but marked by a different tutor, and an Oral Test, carried out by the students' own tutor, in groups of 4/5. This consisted of individual presentations and group discussion.

Level 2 courses had a Written and Oral Exam. The written exam mirrored the style of written assignments during the year. The oral exam was taken in groups of 4/5 and involved short individual presentations and group discussion assessed by an oral examiner.

APPENDIX 5

ASSESSMENT CRITERIA FOR TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENTS
(TMAs)**TMAs requiring written responses**

Comprehension (content 1)	25% for showing understanding of the stimulus material.
Organisation and personal input (content 2)	25% for the organisation and presentation of the written work and for the development and originality of the ideas, as shown through the way in which the theme of the stimulus material is expanded, opinions are expressed and judgements are made (where appropriate).
Accuracy of language	25% for the accuracy of the language.
Range of expression	25% for the range of expressions, variety of vocabulary and quality of sentence structures.

TMAs requiring spoken responses

Comprehension (content 1)	25% for showing understanding of the stimulus material.
Organisation and personal input (content 2)	25% for the organisation and presentation of the spoken response and for the development and originality of the ideas, as shown through the way in which the theme of the stimulus material is expanded, opinions are expressed and judgements are made (where appropriate).
Quality of language	25% for the accuracy of the language and for the range of expressions, variety of vocabulary and quality of sentence structures.
Pronunciation and fluency	25%

APPENDIX 6

THE STUDENT INTERVIEW SAMPLE

Student	Birth Year	Sex	User/Non-user	Lang. Qual.	TL study in school	Result
L120A	1964	M	User	GCSE	✓	P ¹
L120B	1947	F	User	GCSE	✓	1
L120C	1934	F	Non-user	GCSE	✓	P
L120D	1974	F	Non-user	GCSE	✓	P
L221A	1967	F	User	GCSE	✓	3
L221B	1951	F	User	GCSE	✗	2
L221C	1954	F	User	GCSE	✓	2
L221D	1935	M	Non-user	A ²	✓	3
L221E	1968	M	Non-user	None	✓	W
L221F	1944	F	Non-user	GCSE	✓	3
L210A	1930	F	User	GCSE	✗	Q
L210B	1955	F	User	A	✓	2
L210C	1963	F	Non-user	A	✓	2
L210D	1966	F	Non-user	GCSE	✓	3
L210E	1946	F	Non-user	A	✓	2
L210F	1935	F	Non-user	?	✓	2
L130A	1933	M	User	None	✗	1
L130B	1948	F	User	None	✓	P
L130C	1945	M	Non-user	GCSE	✓	P
L230A	1924	F	User	IoL ³	✗	3
L230B	1941	F	User	A	✓	1
L230C	1929	M	User	A	✓	2
L230D	1949	M	Non-user	?	✓	2
L213A	1946	M	User	A	✗	2
L213B	1950	M	User	GCSE	✓	Q
L213C	1939	M	Non-user	None	✓	2
L213D	1969	F	Non-user	?	✗	2
L140A	1978	F	User	A	✓	1
L140B	1932	F	User	None	✗	P

¹ Students on Level 1 courses may be awarded a pass (P), distinction (1) fail with resit (Q) or fail (5). Students on Level 2 courses may be awarded pass grades distinction (1), 2, 3, 4 or fail with resit (Q) or fail (5). W indicates the student withdrew from the course

² GCE A Level

³ Institute of Linguists Certificate

L140C	1951	F	User	GCSE	×	P
L140D	1945	M	Non-user	A	✓	P
L140E	1936	F	Non-user	GCSE	×	P

APPENDIX 7**INDIVIDUAL STUDENT STRATEGY USE**

Users				Non-users			
1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
L120A	12	15	M	L120C	9	11	F
L120B	16	22	F	L120D	20	26	F
L130A	19	27	M	L130C	19	24	M
L130B	23	27	F				
L140A	19	24	F	L140D	21	28	M
L140B	17	18	F	L140E	27	37	F
L140C	23	35	F				
L221A	15	16	F	L221D	24	37	M
L221B	17	21	F	L221E	16	21	M
L221C	25	33	F	L221F	6	9	F
L230A	22	27	F	L230D	19	24	M
L230B	15	19	F				
L230C	15	15	M				
L210A	25	35	F	L210C	18	26	F
L210B	19	25	F	L210D	24	38	F
				L210E	19	35	F
				L210F	19	29	F
L213A	21	30	M	L213C	12	12	M
L213B	20	24	M	L213D	15	26	F

For each group, users and non-users, the columns indicate the following:

Column 1: Course

Column 2: Number of strategy types used.

Column 3: Number of instances of strategy use mentioned during interview.

Column 4: Gender

APPENDIX 8

TUTORS PARTICIPATING IN THE STUDY

Tutor	Language taught	Level	Years with OU ⁴	In pilot?
T1	German	Level 2 60 points	2	
T2	French	Level 2 60 points	3	✓
T3	Spanish	Level 1	In first year	
T4	French	Level 2 60 points	2	✓
T5	French	Level 1	4	✓
T6	French	Level 1	4	
T7	French	Level 2 30 points	3	✓
T8	Spanish	Level 1	In first year	
T9	French	Level 1	4	✓
	German	Level 2 30 points		
T10	French	Level 1	4	✓
		Level 2 30 points		
T11	French	Level 1	4	
T12	French	Level 1	4	
T13	French	Level 2 30 points	4	
T14	Spanish	Level 1	In first year	
T15	French	Level 2 60 points	3	✓
T16	German	Level 1	2	
		Level 2 30 points		
T17	German	Level 1	2	✓

⁴ Years with OU at the time study commenced, ie prior to 1999.

APPENDIX 9

STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE

Language Learning Skills Materials

Please ☒ where appropriate

1. Which language(s) were you studying with the Open University in 1999?

French
German
Spanish

2. How have you studied this language before? If so, please ☒ any box which applies.

At school?

At college or university?

At an evening class?

Living in the country?

Through the OU?

By independent study?

Yes

No

	Yes	No
1)		
2)		
3)		
4)		
5)		
6)		

3. Do you have any formal qualifications in this language? If so, please ☒ any box which applies.

GCSE

A Level

Other (please specify

1)	
2)	
3)	

.....

.....

4. When your tutor introduced these materials to encourage you to look at your strengths and weaknesses and develop your language learning skills did you decide to use them?

Yes

No

--	--

If you answered 'no', would you like to explain why you did not want to use them? (and then go straight to question number 19 please)

.....

.....

If you answered 'yes', please complete the remaining questions.

5. Did you use the list of “Skills involved in TMA tasks” to examine your strengths and weaknesses and set priorities?

Yes

No
6. Did you do this in a tutorial?
Or at home?

Yes

No
7. How much time do you think you spent on this?

Up to 30 minutes

30-60 minutes

60+ minutes

1)

2)

3)

8. Was this easy to use?

Yes

No

Comments:

9. What did you decide were your written and/or spoken language learning priorities during the year?

10. Did you fill in and send the “Self-Assessment Form” with your TMA? Please ☒ any box which applies.

- With every assignment?

Twice?

Once?

I didn't send any
-

If you only used it once or twice can you say why this was?

11. How much time do you think you spent on this?

Up to 30 minutes

30-60 minutes

60+ minutes

1)

2)

3)

12. What did you do when you received your marked TMA with your tutor's feedback?

13. How much time do you think you spent on this?

Up to 30 minutes	1)	<div></div>
30-60 minutes	2)	<div></div>
60+ minutes	3)	<div></div>

14. Did you complete Side 2 of the Self-Assessment Form and set new priorities?

Yes	No
<div></div>	<div></div>

15. How much time do you think you spent on this?

Up to 30 minutes	1)	<div></div>
30-60 minutes	2)	<div></div>
60+ minutes	3)	<div></div>

16. Did you use the "Ten Tips for when you get your TMA back"?

Yes	No
<div></div>	<div></div>

17. Did you find these materials useful? Please give a rating of 1-4, where 1 = *not at all useful* and 4 = *very useful*.

Skills involved in TMA tasks	1)	<div></div>
Self-Assessment	2)	<div></div>
10 Tips	3)	<div></div>

18. Are there any other comments you'd like to make about these materials and how you used them?

As a follow up to this questionnaire, I would like to contact a number of people to take part in an interview at a mutually convenient time/place, in most cases by telephone.

19. Would you be willing to be contacted for a follow-up interview

Yes	No
<div></div>	<div></div>

If you have answered 'yes', please give your name and telephone number, indicating whether day or evening:

...

Thank you for completing this questionnaire. Please return it in the envelope provided by 31st October 1999.

APPENDIX 10

STUDENT INTERVIEW SCHEDULES

Language Learning Skills – Student Survey Interview Question areas

Users

1. When we learn about “learning a language” what does it mean to you?
What does it conjure up?

What does it mean to be a “learner”?

What do you expect to have to do?

What do you expect from your tutor?

2. You decided to use the materials – can you say/remember what made you do so?

Who were they introduced to you?

Were they explained?

When?

How?

3. **Skills involved in a TMA** : Anything you hadn’t really considered before?

- How did you feel about deciding you priorities?
- How did you decide?
- Did you need more help with this?
- Would you have preferred to discuss it? – eg with your tutor?
- Did you think about how to work on your priorities – or discuss this?
- Did this have any effect on the way you approached your course materials?
- Or your assignments?

4. Looking at your **priorities** for the year

- Why these?
- How did you feel about ...?
- What did you do to work on x/y?
- Did you consider any other ways? Can you think of any alternatives?
Why this way?
- Did you try anything new for you?
- Did you use other resources beyond the course? How?
- Did you use the course materials in any different ways from those suggested?
- Did you use the *LLGSG*?

- Would you have found it useful to look at other strategies/ways of working on these skills?

5. Form to accompany TMA : Self-assessment

- How easy did you find it to complete?
Had you met your tutor before sending the first one?
- How did you feel about doing this?
- (If only did it once) why?
- How did you complete it? Did you look back over your work?
- Did you have it in mind when working on your TMA?
- What do you feel the benefits of this approach might be?
What are the difficulties? How might they be overcome?

6. Tutor contact

- Did you contact your tutor in other ways to give this sort of information, or for other purposes? E.g.?

7. TMA Feedback

- How do you feel when you get a TMA back?
How important is the way you feel?
- What do you do
 - written task
 - spoken task
- How do you get over any annoyance/disappointment? Does it ever make you feel you can't go on?
- What do you do once you've got over the initial phase?
 - make notes? How?
 - Digest? How?
 - Re-write/re-record
 - Look up words/grammar?
 - ?

8. Setting new priorities

- Did you do this after a TMA?
- Did they change?
- Did you decide a plan of action?
- Did you ever contact your tutor about the feedback? Was it clear? Did it answer your questions?

9. 10 Tips

- Did you use them?
- Were any particularly relevant/significant to you?

10. Materials overall were intended as a framework to help you think about what you were doing and why. Did they achieve this?

- Would anything else have been more helpful?
- Would you use this approach again – with or without forms provided?
- How useful is it to think about the way you study?

11. If you studied a course last year:-

- Did you change anything in your approach this year?
- Will you change anything next year?

12. Did you keep a “**dossier**” or equivalent?

- How did you use it?
- What did you include?

13. How would you describe yourself as a learner? Cautious? A risk-taker? Experimenter?

- Do you worry a lot about making mistakes?
- How do you check your work?
- Do you use all the criteria?

14. What qualities, strategies do you feel a language learner needs?

Language Learning Skills – Student Survey Interview Question areas

Non-Users

1. When we talk about learning a language, what does it mean to you?
What does it conjure up?
 - What does it mean to be a learner?
 - What do you expect to have to do?
 - What do you expect from your tutor?
2. You decided not to use the materials
 - Explore reasons if not given, or expand
 - How were they introduced to you?
Were they explained?
When?
How?
3. How did you feel about your speaking/writing skills etc in x?
 - Did you feel you had any particular strengths?
 - Were you aware of aspects that you found difficult?
 - Would it be difficult for you to examine your strengths and weaknesses in this way?
4. Looking at your priorities/aspects to work on
 - How did you feel about ...?
 - What did you do to work on ...?
 - Did you consider any other ways? Can you think of any alternatives? Why this way?
 - Did you try anything new for you?
 - Did you use other resources beyond the course? How?
 - Did you use the course materials in any different ways from those suggested?
 - Did you use the *LLGSG*?
 - Would you have found it useful to look at other strategies/ways of working on these skills?
5. Tutor contact
 - Did you talk to your tutor at all about the aspects you wanted to work on?
 - Or for other reasons?
 - Would discussion have helped – e.g. with strategies?
6. TMA Feedback
 - How do you feel when you get a TMA back?
 - What do you do - written task?

- spoken task?
- How do you get over any annoyance/disappointment? Does it ever make you feel you can't go on?
- What do you do once you've got over the initial phase?
 - Make notes? How
 - Digest? How?
 - Re-write or re-record?
 - Look up words/grammar?
 - ?

7. Setting new priorities

- Did you every make decisions about what to work on, or how to do it, on the basis of tutor feedback?
- Did you ever contact your tutor about the feedback? Was it clear? Did it answer your questions?

8. Materials were intended as a framework to help you think about what you were doing and why

- Might this be useful? Why?
- Did you do this in your own way?

9. If you studied a course last year

- Did you change anything in your approach this year?
- Will you change anything next year?

10. Did you keep a "dossier" or equivalent?

- How did you use it?
- What did you include?

11. How would you describe yourself as a learner? Cautious? A risk-taker? Experimenter?

- Do you worry a lot about making mistakes?
- How do you check your work?
- Do you use the marking criteria?

12. What qualities/strategies do you feel a language learner needs?

Language Learning Skills – Student Survey
Skill Strategies to Explore

Speaking : Strategies

Opportunities for practice? Creating them?
How do you prefer to practice your speaking?
What do you do if you want to say something and can't think of the word?
How do you work on: pronunciation?
intonation?

How do you prepare to make a presentation and record it?
What else would help?
How do you rate yourself?/Feel about it?

LLGSG?

How do you organise your speaking practice?

Reading : Strategies

How do you prefer to practice your reading?
What do you do when you read a text?
Look at heading, etc, try to imagine what it is about?
Try to read it and get the gist? Scan for information? Search for details?
Look up words you don't know? Guess from context? Guess from cues, eg
prefixes?
Look out for key words/sign-posts/grammar structures.

How do you take notes? In target language?
Keywords/phrases or longer sections?

Use a highlighter?
How do you rate yourself/feel about it?
How do you organise your reading practice? *LLGSG?*

Listening : Strategies

How do you prefer to practice your listening?
Trying to hear every word?
Try to anticipate what passage will be about from heading, etc?
Listen for key words/sign posts/grammar structures/stress and
intonation/listen for gist, for specific information?
Phrases/sequences
Guess words from context or look up?
Think about alternatives?
How do you organise your listening practice?
How do you take notes? In target language?
How often do you replay?
How do you rate yourself?/feel about it? *LLGSG?*

Writing : Strategies

How do you prefer to practice your writing?
When you write how much time do you spend on trying for correct language
v. how it will sound to the reader? (ie in spirit of task?)
How do you rate yourself?/Feel about it?
Planning? Notes – in target language?

How much attention to style? Choice of vocab? *LLGSG*?
How do you organise your writing practice?
What about writing within a time limit?
How do you check your work? What do you look for?

Vocabulary Extension : Strategies

How do you prefer to learn vocab? – choices?
How do you organise your vocab learning?
What does “knowing” or “learning” a word or phrase mean?
Have you tried any different methods?
LLGSG?
How do you rate yourself? How do you feel about it?
What makes it easier?

Grammar : Strategies

How do you prefer to learn grammar? – choices?
How do you organise your grammar learning?
What does “knowing” or “learning” grammar mean to you?
Have you tried any different methods?
LLGSG?
How do you rate yourself? How do you feel about it?
How do you know you’ve learned something?
What makes it easier?

APPENDIX 11

TUTOR INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

1. How did you introduce the materials to your students?
2. What was the response and what use have the students made of the material so far?
3. Are there any things you want to say about the materials (e.g. layout, wording, items included)?
4. Have you incorporated learning skills into your teaching in any way?
5. How have you responded to any self-assessment forms which you have received?
6. Any general observations or comments?
7. (For those involved in the pilot in 1998) Do you feel you have done anything differently or that there have been any differences in the response this year?

APPENDIX 12

BROAD CATEGORIES USED IN INITIAL COLLATION OF DATA

Student users	Student non-users	Tutors
View of language learning	View of language learning	Tutorial introduction
Priorities	Priorities	Non-tutorial introduction
Explanation/distribution of materials	Explanation/distribution of materials	Explanation to non-attenders
Audit reactions	Reactions to materials	Student response (audit)
Speaking development	Speaking development	St. response (SA form)
Reading development	Reading development	Comments on materials
Vocabulary development	Vocabulary development	Use in teaching (audit)
Grammar development	Grammar development	Use in teaching (SA form)
Listening development	Listening development	Use in teaching (10 tips)
Writing development	Writing development	Use in teaching(skill sheet)
Checking written work	Checking written work	Tutorial activities
Preparing oral assignments	Preparing oral assignments	Replying to SA forms
Preparing written assignments	Preparing written assignments	Time
Alternative use of course materials	Alternative use of course materials	Work required (tutors and students)
Use of Language Learner's Good Study Guide	Use of Language Learner's Good Study Guide	Value of materials
Contact with tutor and other students	Contact with tutor and other students	Why students use them or not
Use of self-assessment		Differences in

form		approach from 1998
Reaction to assignment return	Reaction to assignment return	Reflection on teaching
Nature of tutor feedback	Nature of tutor feedback	Student self-direction?
Work on tutor feedback	Work on tutor feedback	Other observations
Use of part 2 of self- assessment form		
Use of 10 tips sheet		
Time	Time	
Risk taker?	Risk taker?	
Change in approach to study	Indications of self- assessment	
Advice to new students	Advice to new students	
Value of materials		